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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

EVIDENCE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES, PLAY, GAMES

AND PASTIMES OF THE VIKINGS,

700 A.D.-1200 A.D.

by



GERT VAN NIEKERK

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Evidence of Physical Activities, Play, Games and Pastimes of the Vikings, 700 A.D. - 1200 A.D.," submitted by Gert van Niekerk in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The author dedicates this thesis to his parents Gert and Huldah van Niekerk.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to find evidence, archaeological, literary and artistic, regarding the physical activities, play, games and pastimes of the Vikings between the years 700 A.D. to 1200 A.D. An attempt was made to reconstruct a fairly accurate picture of the Viking way of life and to show how these physical activities, play, games and pastimes fitted into and contributed to Viking society. Furthermore, the general behaviour, temperament and attitude of people in their play, games and pastimes is often a reliable yardstick in attempting to evaluate national character.

The main source of evidence offered in this study are the Icelandic Sagas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which relate episodes in the lives of great Vikings in the Viking Age. It was necessary at times to quote at length from the Sagas in order to appreciate and visualize as clearly as possible what the Sagas are trying to tell us. Only then does it become possible to begin formulating opinions and attempt conclusions. Archaeological evidence is also offered but as this source is limited, heavy reliance was made on literature and the advice of experts in the field.

As the title suggests, this work will deal mainly with the physical activities, play, games and pastimes of the Vikings in the period 700 A.D.--1200 A.D. These dates were chosen simply because they coincide with the period of

Viking expansion known as the Viking Age. The term "Viking" only came into use in the eighth century, with the first Viking raids, while the last of the Viking raids took place towards the close of the twelfth century. Evidence and discussion in this thesis is not confined solely to play, games and pastimes involving vigorous physical exertion. Rather, an attempt has been made to show up as many of the recreational activities of the Vikings as possible, bearing in mind that such activities are an end in themselves and not indulged in for material gain. Love of music, feasting, metalwork and carving could surely then be regarded as recreational, whilst activities such as sailing and hunting could also have been indulged in for recreation as well as for utilitarian purposes.

The physical activities, play, games and pastimes in this study have been dealt with under the following headings: the skilful handling of weapons, horses and chariots, aquatics, winter travel and sports, athletic exercises including running, jumping and climbing, contests of strength including wrestling and tug-of-war, ball games, hunting, hawking and fishing, games including board games, dice and turf-pitching, sailing and rowing, feasting, metalwork and woodwork, and knowledge of runes and poetry.

Basically the historical method of research was used in this study. After selecting and delimiting the area of research both primary and secondary source material was

collected. The former involving contemporary literature and archaeological artifacts has already been mentioned.

Secondary source material included all recent literature on the Viking Age that could be acquired plus the assistance and information received from experts in the field.

The evidence gained from these sources was presented in its simplest form with the author then attempting conclusions and drawing parallels. What hypothesis there might be are tentative, the aim being that the material speaks for itself.

This study cannot be considered as final because of the vast amount of material still uncovered. But it is the sincere wish of the author that this preliminary study will be continued, reviewed and expanded where necessary. Unless physical educators soon devote more attention to historical research, much important source material will be lost permanently to mankind. This is an exciting and growing field with a multiplicity of urgent and worth-while problems to investigate.

PREFACE

Despite the apparent lack of literary evidence and the late start made by professional archaeology in Northern Europe, the contribution of archaeology and literature in the form of the Sagas to our knowledge of the Viking world is quite considerable.

In few ancient records have we so many detailed accounts of sports and games as we have in the Sagas. It is true that the Viking could not write, even though here and there men could scratch out a few runes on wood or stone, and therefore he had no literature. But nevertheless, he had composed tales and poetry of a kind that even today can thrill and astonish. He sang of the gods of his forefathers, endowed by him with personalities akin to those of the Viking warrior himself; in the Edda poems he told of their adventures, their origin and their struggle with the giants, of their nimble wit, and their loves and quarrels. All men knew the grand Bjarkamal, the Danish heroic lay that Olaf caused to be recited to him before the battle of Stiklesteid; the history of the kings and the Viking chiefs were learned by heart for recitation by professional bards and reciters. Already in the tenth century the Icelanders had begun to weave the stories that are now enshrined in the literature of the Sagas. But the Norsemen could boast something else beside a taste for heroic and dramatic recitation, for he had wit; dearly he loved the saucy remarks and lampoons that could be composed during the daily round, and the best

of these he was at pains to memorize and circulate, as the Sagas show.

With regard to archaeology, investigators, increasingly becoming masters of their art, and drawing increasingly on scientific aids, have uncovered thousands of graves and many hundred dwellings; they have identified and explored Viking Age towns, and can inform us with confidence of ploughed fields, cattle-lyres, drainage systems, farmsteads and smithies. They have found warriors with their weapons, boats and horses, merchants with scales and weights, gaming boards, chessmen and dice. They have found sleighs, bone skates, carts, dog-collars and leads, and horse-harnesses. We have a good idea of what the people wore, and what tools they used from broadaxe to eating knife, from spear to needle. We know something of Norse religion and much of Norse funerary practice. We can study the Viking at home and accompany him abroad with his distinctive personal ornaments and ship-burials.

Using all this evidence this thesis attempts to present the Vikings neither as blood-thirsty ruffians nor as blond, blue-eyed heroes, but to relate their activities to what is known of the material and social background of their lives.

But in interpreting and presenting this material there are limitations. The Viking Movement is that manifestation of the Viking Age which most powerfully,

perhaps most painfully, impressed itself upon non-Scandinavian chroniclers abroad. By their emphasis on the destructive effects of the Viking Movement in Western Europe, and their neglect of its contributions to trade, discovery, colonization and the political and cultural institutions of the countries affected, these chroniclers produced for the contemporary world and posterity alike a picture at once incomplete, lurid and distorted. They made little inquiry into the lands, peoples, beliefs and civilizations from which (as they saw it) these priest-murderers and robbers of the Church emerged--a lack of dispassionate comment made more serious by the shortage of contemporary records in Scandinavia itself. Consequently, to see the Viking Age in terms of the Viking Movement, and this last through the eyes of West European Christian annalists and chroniclers, is to see it, in every sense of the word, partially. It turns a many-faceted and durably important contribution to our European heritage into a sensational tale of raid, raping, and conquest, and an interplay of complementary aspects of the European genius into a brutal Saga. Not least, it gives the Age a sudden inexplicable beginning and offers inadequate reasons for its end, whereas on examination it will be found to evolve out of the centuries preceding it and merges with the years which followed.

Later medieval writers are often still more violently partisan in their accounts, while modern historians

are often hardly less emotional. But there does exist a very different school of thought, chiefly among the students of Norse literature rather than European history. Basing themselves on the heroic Scandinavian poetry, and the Icelandic prose Sagas, these scholars built up a highly favourable picture of the Vikings and their way of life, seeing them as models of all the manly virtues, courage, hardihood, loyalty, love of individual freedom and sense of honour.

But it should be pointed out that Norse literature, though in many ways offering valuable insights into Scandinavian mentality, has dangers of its own for the historian who follows it too uncritically. The Icelandic Sagas are in many ways the most fascinating sources available. But they usually describe events which took place many years before they were written. Thus the writers of these Sagas invariably had to rely for their information on folklore, tales passed down by word of mouth and traditional poems that were memorized. This means that in many cases the Sagas cannot be factually accurate in so far as relating historical events are concerned. But they are of great value in that they draw for us a picture of Viking customs and way of life. Experts in this field tend to agree that the validity of the Sagas is greater as source material for cultural studies than as sources for the true facts of history.

Viking poetry, on the other hand, actually dates back to the Viking Age. But much of this (with its emphasis on warlike prowess, loyalty, honour, generosity and unflinching courage in the face of doom) expresses the ideals of heroic conduct admired among aristocrats and their warrior followers--ideals which were not directly relevant to the daily preoccupations of a farmer or a merchant, even if they might inspire him in moments of peril.

Such then are some of the problems related to assessing the evidence for this study. Historians are expected to tell the truth, but can never be certain that data are absolutely true. There is always the possibility that even the most reliable witness to an event erred in perception or memory. Inevitably then, if a writer is to preserve a proper scholarly attitude towards historical evidence, the words "probably" and "possibly" must recur in his pages more often than stylistic considerations would demand.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Before the Viking Age

The Vikings were the descendants of the enormous Gothic tribe formerly dwelling around the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, to which district this tribe seems to have come from yet more eastern regions. During the Neolithic Period between 4000 B.C. and 1800 B.C. branches of this tribe wandered up to the northern coasts of the Baltic, whence one branch departed to the opposite tracts of Scandinavia, peopling and settling the southern part of present day Sweden, the greater part of Norway, the Danish Islands, the northern part of the Jutland Peninsula and parts of Western Europe. The other branch of the Goths remained south of the Baltic, and afterwards scattered under the great European migration of nations over a great part of Southern Europe, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal and France, and often making considerable conquests. In Italy, Theodorik established the Ostrogothic Kingdom in 493 A.D., and in Spain Ostulph formed the Visigothic Kingdom.^{1,2,3}

¹A. Mawer, The Vikings (Cambridge University Press, 1913), chapter I.

²H. Shetelig, An Introduction to the Viking History of Western Europe (Oslo, 1940), chapter I, pp. 1 ff.

³H. Shetelig and H. Falk, Scandinavian Archaeology (Oxford, 1937), chapter I, pp. 1 ff.

On the southern borders of Denmark, in the present Duchy of Holstein, dwelt the Saxons, belonging to the German Goths; higher up in Schleswig and in the southern and western part of Jutland dwelt the Angles and Jutlanders, forming in a certain way, an intermediate line between the Scandinavian and German Goths. But as a great number of Angles, Saxons, and Jutlanders, in the middle of the fifth century, led by the brothers Hengist and Horsa, departed for England, founding there the Saxon Heptarchy, the more northern Goths settled in the regions which those had left, and were afterwards the prevailing tribe in Jutland and Schleswig. On the entrance of the Goths into Scandinavia, the land was inhabited by two reciprocally kindred nations, whose present names are Laplanders and Finns. Both of them had come from the East, but the Laplanders were forced by the Finns up to the remotest parts of Norway and Sweden, where remnants of them are yet to be found. The Finns themselves were, after a valiant resistance, pressed back by the Goths, whose descendants at present live in Finland.⁴

It is also possible that some Celtic tribes, the primitive inhabitants of the south and west of Europe, have lived in the Scandinavian countries. The culture of the oldest dwellers of the north was, in the Neolithic Period,

⁴A. H. Keane, "The Lapps: Their Origin, Ethnical Affinities, Physical and Mental Characteristics," (Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1886, XV).

at a very low ebb. They lived dispersed, rambling about the immense and impenetrable forests, and on the coasts adjacent to the ocean and numerous lakes. Game from the forests and fish from the sea and lakes supplied the inhabitants with nutriment and hides, and furs to protect their bodies against the severe climate. In such respects they were well off, wanting nothing fortune could supply. Their weapons and hunting tools were stones, but these were often made with admirable workmanship.⁵

The Bronze Age in Scandinavia lasted from approximately 1800 B.C. to 600 B.C. During this time a number of extraneous influences profoundly altered the northern culture. The most dominant culture contacts were with Central Europe, Brittany and Western England. The Bronze Age may justly be described as a period wherein a Scandinavian culture was evolved of so great an import that it may be deemed the basis of the subsequent cultures of the north. It was a development of the Scandinavian peoples, albeit under strong foreign influences, that was sufficiently pronounced to stamp its descendants in the succeeding centuries as sprung from its stock. In a word, the Bronze Age is the time of the segregation of the northern peoples into the characterized cultural and ethnic groups from which evolved the Viking peoples. It is a period distinguished

⁵W. Z. Ripley, The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study (New York, 1899), pp. 1 ff.

not only for the steady acceptance of outside fashions, but also for a plain and unmistakable resistance to the domination of these fashions, a brilliant period concluding in the final triumph of a northern spirit that moulded according to its own will and to suit its own purpose the culture influences of the outside world.⁶

The Early Iron Age (600 B.C.--500 A.D.) in Scandinavia is commonly divided into two periods. The first, known as the Pre-Roman Iron Age, extends from 600 B.C. to A.D. 1. During this time the north stood isolated from the rest of Europe. In the second period, the Roman Iron Age, Scandinavian shares, although at second hand, in the dramatic cultural revolution imposed on the outlying territories of western and northern Europe by the conquering armies of Rome.

The Pre-Roman Iron Age saw a serious degeneration of this northern civilization, together with a partial immigration of its peoples. But the Roman Iron Age itself was the time of a cultural renaissance that re-established the northern civilization as a powerful and well-equipped group of tribes, a restless people with eyes turned enviously upon the richer lands of the south. From these group of tribes came forth the Vikings.⁷

⁶H. R. Ellis Davidson, Pagan Scandinavia (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).

⁷T. D. Kendrick, A History of the Vikings (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1930), chapter I, pp. 1 ff.

The Viking Age

In medieval Scandinavian languages a "viking" was a pirate, a freebooter who sought wealth either by ship-borne raids on foreign coasts or by waylaying more peaceful seafarers in home waters. There is also an abstract noun "viking," which meant "the act of going raiding overseas." Strictly speaking, therefore, the term Viking should only be applied to men actually engaged in these violent pursuits, and not to every contemporary Scandinavian farmer, merchant, settler or craftsman, nor even to warriors fighting in the dynastic wars of their lords or in their own private feuds. However, it was the raiders who made the most impact on the Europe of their time, and who have attracted most attention among historians since. Thus it has become customary to apply the term "Viking Age" to the period of Scandinavian history beginning in the 790's (the time of the first recorded raids on Western Europe) and petering out somewhere round the middle of the twelfth century (by which time raids and immigrations had ceased, the settlements established abroad had become thoroughly integrated with the local population, and social changes in the Scandinavian homelands had marked the transition to their true Middle Ages). Indeed, the term is such a convenient label for the distinctive culture of this period that one now talks not only of "Viking Ships" and "Viking Weapons," but of "Viking Art," "Viking Houses," "Viking Agriculture" and "Viking pastimes,

sports and games," expressions which would have seemed meaningless to people living at the time.⁸

The activities of the Vikings ranged over five thousand miles, reaching the borders of Persia in the east and, in the west, crossing the Atlantic to the shores of the New World. Wherever they went--the British Isles, France, Spain, Italy, North Africa--they ruthlessly pillaged and conquered. In some cases they settled the conquered lands, establishing themselves as rulers. Danish Vikings conquered parts of England, Norwegian Vikings settled in Scotland and Ireland. Jointly they conquered and settled the portion of France known as Normandy. The Norwegian Vikings and their descendants colonized widely in the North Atlantic islands; they also established a short-lived settlement on the coast of North America.

Swedish Vikings made themselves masters of the Eastern Baltic. They spread widely in Russia, pushing down-river to the Black and Caspian seas, even threatening Constantinople and parts of Persia. The Vikings were the last of the Germanic barbarian conquerors and the first of the European seafaring explorers.⁹

A number of explanations have been offered to

⁸J. Simpson, Everyday Life in the Viking Age (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 11.

⁹H. Arbmán, The Vikings (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), chapter III.

account for the tremendous outburst of Viking activity in the ninth century. Johannes Steenstrup put forward the thesis of over-population.¹⁰ He referred to what he called the "Norman tradition," preserved in a number of literary sources, both West European and Scandinavian. This tradition applied, he thought, first and foremost to Denmark, though the rest of Scandinavia could also be included. It was to the effect that, at the beginning of the Viking Age, the Scandinavian lands were over-populated, a circumstance which would explain the common West European accounts of the enormous size of the Viking armies; like storm clouds, swarms of grasshoppers, waves of the ocean and so on. There are also reports of the thousands lost in battle by the Vikings. Though allowance must be made for exaggeration, these accounts must contain a grain of truth.

The Scandinavian laws of succession were such that, whenever a new king, earl or ruling chieftain secured the succession, he was likely to leave at least one ambitious and discontented "pretender," who would go abroad to seek influential alliances or wealth, so that on his return he could press his claim with more force. This sort of situation is not a sufficient cause to account for widespread Viking invasions.¹¹

¹⁰J. Steenstrup, Normannerne (Copenhagen, 1876-1882).

¹¹J. Brondsted, The Vikings (London: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 25.

Foreign pressure can be discounted as a cause for Viking raids. There is no evidence for it. The early Viking raids bear no similarity to the great movements of the migration period.

A frequent cause of migration in history has been the failure of crops, and consequent famine, due to changes in climatic conditions. Scandinavian geologists, working on the peat-bogs, have discovered evidence of many variations of climate in the north, but none datable to the early ninth century. Moreover, the early Viking raids were in no sense migratory movements. The Vikings had every intention of returning with their loot and glory.¹²

Mercantile conditions were undoubtedly major causes of the Viking raids. The expansion of trade and the lure of the great riches which could be gained from piracy, were probably two of the most important factors behind the Viking raids. The wealthy but unprotected towns and monasteries of their southern and western neighbours offered booty for the Viking. There was little fear of reprisal from the fragmented kingdoms of the British Isles, or from the weakened Empire of Charlemagne, which was pre-occupied with its dynastic squabbles. The Viking Age in Norway, Sweden and Denmark was a period of gradual consolidation of national monarchies. Ambitious chieftains and powerful clans struggled for power at both local and national levels.

¹²Ibid., p. 25.

Displaced chieftains and their followers, as well as the younger sons of successful rulers, easily took to free-lance raiding as a way of gaining wealth. Many a Scandinavian was a raider during the summer and performed the duties of a conventional landowner during the rest of the year.¹³ But of course it was not only the lure of plunder that attracted the Vikings. Commercial opportunities offered prospects of wealth and power, particularly to the Swedes, who entered Russia in order to control the trade routes there.

The Viking Way of Life

In appraising these causes for Viking expansion, there is one which must not be overlooked--the Viking way of life. They were known to have been proud, adventurous, with a yearning for glory, a desire to excel in battle, and a scorn for death. These qualities of heroism and virility, combined with their mercantile skills, made them a powerful and dangerous race. Early monastic historians, in their records of the Vikings, emphasized the cunning, cruelty and treachery of this war-like people. The sagas, on the other hand, show them in a different light; telling of the boldness, generosity, frankness, and self-discipline of these famous warriors. No doubt, in the aggregate, they possessed all the qualities, complimentary and otherwise, which were ascribed to them: the Vikings were not all alike. But a

¹³Ibid., p. 26.

general trait appeared to be: a daring resoluteness that made their period the greatest in the history of the North.¹⁴

Abroad the Vikings were pillagers, conquerors and traders; at home they were principally landowners who farmed, hunted, fished, raised livestock, and even had time for recreational pursuits. The independent farmer, working alone or with his kinsmen, was the back-bone of Scandinavian society. However small his holding, he was a freeman, neither bound like a serf to land owned by another nor subject to complex feudal obligations to his superiors.¹⁵

The community leaders in the Scandinavian social system were the chieftains and nobles called "jarls." They were the more prosperous landed proprietors and the heads of clans, who could command the support of a large number of retainers. They were the leaders of the Viking raiders and the judges at the Things, local assemblies of freemen that considered disputes and discussed matters of community import. The power of these chieftains was not absolute, and they were regarded primarily as first among equals. Although they did not engage in farming themselves, they actively supervised the labors of hired retainers and

¹⁴E. Oxenstierna, The Norsemen (New York: Graphic Society Publishers, Ltd., 1965), chapter I, pp. 13 ff.

¹⁵A. Olrik, Viking Civilization (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1930), pp. 3 ff.

"thralls," the bondsmen who did menial work. Little is known about the thrall.

Above the chieftains and jarls was the king. In the early Viking era he was chosen by the chiefs, and his power rested on their goodwill. As time went on, the numerous petty kings gradually yielded to a few centralized hereditary monarchies with a military levy and a rudimentary civil service.¹⁶

Kinship patterns were highly developed in all classes of Viking society, and a man usually acted in concert with his clan brothers in matters of importance. Clans zealously guarded the good names of their members, and the violation of a man's honor often led to feuds of destructive intensity.¹⁷

Women had great importance within the household, and the weight given their opinions is often alluded to in the stories of the period. The Scandinavian woman could retain property, withhold her consent to marriage, and divorce herself from an incompatible mate. Outside the home, however, there was little scope for women in the conduct of affairs.¹⁸

The Viking subsisted on two meals a day. His

¹⁶G. Jones, A History of the Vikings (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁷T. D. Kendrick, op. cit., pp. 117 ff.

¹⁸T. Ramskou, Everday Viking Life (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1967), p. 83.

staples were meat, fish and cereal grains. The meat and fish were usually cooked by boiling, less often by roasting. Drying and salting were used for preservation. Cereals included rye, oats, barley and several types of wheat. They were usually boiled to make porridge, but were sometimes baked into bread. Vegetables and fruits were seldom eaten. Beverages included milk, ale, the fermented honey drink known as mead and, among the upper classes, imported wine.¹⁹

Farmer's clothing consisted of a long woolen shirt, short baggy trousers, leg wrappings and square cloaks. Viking men of the upper class wore long trousers, hose and cloaks of show materials. The better clothing materials were imported from the Frisians of the Netherlands, who were superior weavers. Woolen mittens, caps of wool or fur, and even felt hats were worn. Upper-class women commonly wore the "kirtle," a long gown divided into bodice and skirt. Hanging from the buckles on the gown were fine chains to which the woman attached her scissors and a container for needles, knife, keys and other small everyday items. Married women fastened their hair up in a knot and wore conical head-dresses of white linen. Unmarried girls wore their hair down, held only by a fillet.

Viking men and women were extremely fond of wearing

¹⁹Ibid., p. 109.

jewelry, as evidenced by the large numbers of rings, bracelets, brooches and necklaces unearthed by archaeologists.²⁰

Farmer's houses were generally simple one-roomed cottages, built either of close vertical planking or, more often, of wattle-and-daub. Sometimes the dwelling sheltered both the farmer's family and his cattle. Viking men of wealth lived in a "great hall," a large rectangular building that housed all of the many people attached to the household. In heavily forested Scandinavia the hall was made of wood, often in combination with clay, but in Iceland and Greenland, where timber was scarce, it was constructed largely of rock with walls three feet thick or more. The roof was generally of turf. Remains of buildings one-hundred-and-ten feet long have been found, but a length of fifty to seventy feet was probably more common. Inside, the central room was low and dark, with a long fire pit extending down the centre. The room served as the living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom. Some halls had rows of posts along each side to support the roof, and the side aisles formed by these were divided by partitions into sleeping compartments. Sometimes a "high seat" for the master of the house was built at one end between carved pillars. Tables and chairs were used, and tapestries were hung on the walls for

²⁰M. W. Williams, Social Scandinavia in the Viking Age (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), pp. 72 ff.

festive occasions.²¹

The Vikings prized skill in battle and physical prowess. But accomplishments in literature, history and the arts were esteemed no less.²²

Viking literature was preserved in oral form until some time after the end of the Viking Age. The Runic alphabet of the Vikings was reserved primarily for inscriptions on memorial stones, for magical formulas, and for sending short messages. In Iceland alone has any sizable body of ancient lore been preserved. There it was written down in the Latin alphabet by the post-Viking scribes, who wished to record permanently the exploits of their chiefly ancestors.

It is true that the Viking could not write and therefore had no literature. But nevertheless, he had composed tales and poetry of a kind that even today can thrill and astonish. He sang of the gods of his forefathers, endowed by him with personalities akin to those of the Viking warrior himself, and in the Edda poems he told of their adventures, their origin and their struggle with the giants, of their nimble wit and their love and quarrels. All men knew the grand Bjarkamal, the Danish heroic lay that

²¹Ibid., pp. 123 ff.

²²P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), pp. 389 ff.

Olaf caused to be recited to him before the battle of Stiklesteid; the history of the kings and the Viking chiefs were learned by heart for recitations by professional bards and "scalds." Already in the tenth century the Icelanders had begun to weave the stories that are now enshrined in the literature of the sagas. But the Northman could boast something else beside a taste for heroic and dramatic recitation, for he had wit; he dearly loved the saucy remarks and lampoons that could be composed during the daily round, and the best of these he was at pains to memorize and circulate, as the sagas show. Likewise he enjoyed the curious and baffling scaldic verse of which the sagas are so full, and wherein the poet cloaked his meaning by a prodigious use of synonyms of the most extravagant and far-fetched kind.²³

The sagas are prose narratives and are regarded as gems in Icelandic literature. There are three main types. The most important, the so-called family sagas, deal with real personages of the Viking Age. Several dozen family sagas have survived, including five that have the length and scope of major novels. The two other varieties of sagas are historical sagas, which are accounts of the Norwegian kings and the settlement of Iceland, and the late Viking fictional sagas, novelistic adventure stories, which reveal influences from the Byzantium Empire and India. Another major prose

²³P. H. Sawyer, The Age of the Vikings (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 12 ff.

work that originated in Iceland was the Prose Edda, a collection of mythology that was set down by Snorri Sturluson, a thirteenth century Icelandic historian and political figure.

Poetry, too was in high repute among the Vikings. The Icelandic hero and adventurer Egil Skallagrimsson was as proud of his rank as a poet as he was of his prowess in battle. Court poets, or skalds, celebrated the virtues of the jarls and princes in complex poetic stanzas. Much simpler than the skaldic verses are the poems about gods and ancient heroes, preserved in the collection known as the Poetic Edda.²⁴

But all this, though in many ways offering valuable insights into Scandinavian mentality, has dangers of its own for the historian who follows it too uncritically. The Icelandic sagas and the eddas are in many ways the most fascinating sources available. But they usually describe events which took place many years before they were written. Thus the writers of these sagas often had to rely for their information on folklore, tales passed down by word of mouth, traditional poems that were memorized and so on. This means that the sagas cannot always be factually accurate in so far as relating historical events are concerned. But they are of considerable value in that they present us a picture of

²⁴J. Simpson, op. cit., pp. 160 ff.

Viking culture, customs and ways of life. Also, where the sagas and poems are permeated with pagan beliefs and attitudes, they are surely admissible in this sense. It is a commonly accepted view that the celebrated poem Havamal, for example, embodied the wisdom and experience of the later Vikings of Iceland and Norway. The Havamal contains aphorisms, advice and admonitions--sometimes cynical, sometimes matter-of-fact, sometimes ironical or sarcastic, sometimes earnest and sincere--which combined to reveal a daily life which may possibly reflect the reality of the Viking Age.²⁵

The art of the Vikings was primarily decorative. The favored designs, fanciful animals and vigorous abstract patterns of interlacing bands were used for wood carvings, handsome gold and silver work, and the ornamentation of rune and picture stones set up to commemorate events of importance.²⁶

The early Vikings worshipped a number of gods and goddesses. The most important divinities were Odin, the moody all-wise chieftain of the Gods, and Thor, the great bearded god of the common man. Other Gods included Frey, Tyr, Balder, Heimdallr, and a large number of family or household divinities. The gods were generally worshipped in

²⁵J. Brondsted, op. cit., p. 316.

²⁶D. M. Wilson and O. Klindt-Jensen, Viking Art (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

temples or at sacred forest groves and wells. The Vikings also believed in a host of other supernatural beings: trolls, elves, giants, water sprites, and similar creatures of forest, hill and river.

Blood sacrifice was common. The sacrificial animals were frequently eaten by the priest and his congregation at banquets staged in the temple. Human sacrifice occasionally took place. There were, in addition to the priests and priestesses of the gods, wizards who were believed to practice black magic.²⁷

Men of the Viking Age attached great importance to good luck as a type of spiritual strength that adhered to each person, particularly to chieftains and kings. Nonetheless, the general outlook of the age was pessimistic and fatalistic. Fate was conceived as an independent agent above both gods and men, and beyond their influence. It was believed that men and gods were doomed to pass away in a mighty battle and cataclysm known as Ragnarok. There was to be no reprieve from this final and utter destruction of the world.²⁸

Christianity made its way slowly into the north, offering an attractive alternative to the bitter pessimism of the Norse religion. As a divine monarch, the god of the

²⁷P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., pp. 343 ff.

²⁸A. Olrik, op. cit., pp. 28 ff.

Christians received special support from the Scandinavian kings, struggling to establish and consolidate their power. Christianity took hold in Denmark and Norway in the tenth century, and in the year 1000 A.D. the chiefs of Iceland voted to accept the new religion. Sweden was not converted until late in the eleventh century, and pagan worship lingered on in the north as late as the early twelfth century.²⁹

The Viking Raid

The details of Viking raids are derived chiefly from accounts by the victims, who did not lack any eloquence in chronicling the Norse depredations, described as being conducted with ruthlessness, fury and success. The early Viking raids were conducted on the principle of hit and run. Approaching without warning from the sea in their light, fast ships, the Northmen struck at weakly defended places of known wealth, either along a coast or up a river. They put the few defenders to the sword, seized the remaining inhabitants as slaves, removed all goods of any value, and burned whatever remained. They soon learned to use horses on their raiding expeditions, often stealing them as they went. The terror inspired by the Viking warriors is reflected in a prayer of the time: A Furore Normannorum libera nos Domine ("From the fury of the Northmen, deliver us Lord").³⁰

²⁹Ibid., pp. 128 ff.

³⁰P. H. Sawyer, op. cit., p. 117.

Particularly feared were the "Beserks," Viking warriors who went mad in the heat of battle. Many of these warriors dressed themselves in the bearskin doublet in the belief that they partook of the animal's ferocity. It is believed that their savage frenzy was the result of chewing certain weeds containing stimulants. To the victims, every pillaging Viking was doubtless a Berserk, but in Scandinavia the term was used chiefly to describe the professional bullies and toughs who often travelled in gangs. Expelled whenever possible by the local authorities, the Berserks found free scope for their activities abroad.³¹

As the Vikings increased in numbers, audacity and organizational skill, their raiding pattern changed. Viking armies would approach a river mouth in late winter and set up a camp there; then, with the onset of summer, they would begin the campaign up-river for the entire season. Eventually entire armies, bent on colonization as well as pillage, occupied large stretches of foreign coasts.³²

Viking conduct was typically mercenary. Generally speaking, Vikings could be bought off for silver. The cost, however, was high. In the period from A.D. 991 to 1018 Norwegians, Danes and Swedes, it is estimated, extorted from England alone nearly two hundred and ten thousand pounds of

³¹P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., p. 423.

³²J. Brondsted, op. cit., pp. 28 ff.

silver. Sometimes the victims hired individual Viking warriors, entire troops, or even whole armies for offensive and defensive operations against other Vikings.³³

Infancy, Childhood and Youth

Viking parents generally desired and welcomed children; to be without offspring was looked upon as a real calamity, and childless couples prayed to the goddess Freyia. But in the early North, as in ancient Greece and Rome, parents occasionally voluntarily rid themselves of their children immediately after birth. The baby was placed in an open grave in the woods, on a hill or by the roadside, to be devoured by wild beasts, to die from starvation or the effects of the weather, or to be rescued and adopted by a merciful passer-by.³⁴

Among the chief reasons which led to the exposure of a child were deformity and discord between man and wife; dissatisfaction of the wife's father with the union of which the child was the fruit; persuasion of the wife if her husband got a child by a concubine; superstitions as to evil omens at the time of birth, which were thought to indicate coming misfortunes caused by the child; and utter inability of the parents to raise the child on account of their poverty. Illegitimate children, because of the stigma

³³T. D. Kendrick, op. cit., pp. 193 ff.

³⁴M. W. Williams, op. cit., p. 57.

attached to the mother, were more frequently cast out than those born in wedlock.³⁵

The exposure of the child depended so entirely upon the will of the father, that not even the mother dared to oppose it; if the child was fatherless at its birth, the right was exercised by the person who ruled over the household or family, and the child was then carried out by a thrall. Such children as had not been received by the father, or with his knowledge or consent, were called uborin born which means "none accepted." The exposure itself was called utburd which meant "carrying out." In Hord's Saga was written:

Signy bore a girl, both large and handsome; her brother Torfi would not let it be water-sprinkled until he knew how it would go with her life. She died and he became so angry that he wanted to have the child exposed.³⁶

It appears from this saga that Torfi was angry and concerned at Signy's marriage, because he was away when the betrothal took place, and he had not been consulted about the match.

The custom of exposing children was so deeply rooted in the minds of the people that Christianity itself could not at first prevent it from taking place. Thus, it is stated in St. Olaf's Saga:

³⁵P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 40.

³⁶Ibid., p. 40.

Sigvat Skald and other Icelanders were with King Olaf as has been told. Olaf enquired carefully how Christianity was kept in Iceland. He thought it was very badly kept when they told him that it was allowed by the laws to eat horseflesh and expose children as the heathens used to do.³⁷

If a baby were to live, it was sprinkled with water, apparently a genuine heathen custom, not simply an imitation of baptism. Next the father chose a name, preferably one carrying good luck, or one that had been borne by a recently dead kinsman, often an uncle or grandfather of the baby; certain god's names, such as Thor, were often used as prefixes, originally as a sign that the child was placed under divine protection.

Children were usually brought up at home, but it was fairly common for a boy to pass part of his childhood as a foster-son in another household. Far from being a sign of poverty, the arrangement was designed to forge honorable bonds between the two families; in feuds and other difficulties the boy would be able to claim the same degree of help from his foster-family as from his own kin, would have corresponding duties towards them, and would remain on particularly affectionate terms with them for the rest of his life.³⁸

No schools or institutions for formal instruction

³⁷Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1894), volume II, p. 69.

³⁸J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 142.

were in existence in Scandinavia during the Viking Age; education was entirely a matter of the home. As a rule, the parents or the nurse were the teachers. The general education given the girls aimed primarily to train them in a knowledge of the household arts. They learned to spin, weave and dye wool and linen; to sew, knit, and embroider; to scrub and clean, and to wash and smooth the family clothes; to work in the dairy at making butter and cheese, and to prepare and preserve foods in various other ways; to brew and to cook; to supervise the household and to play the hostess. But though this constituted the most important part of their training, the purely intellectual side was not completely neglected. Some of the girls acquired, by direct instruction and by imitation, a knowledge of runes; also, they could quote proverbs, sing songs, recite poetry, and tell sagas. They also played on musical instruments and played board games.

Since boys in the warlike Viking Age had to play a much more important part in life than girls, proportionally greater attention was bestowed upon their education. The most important part of their training was that which made the boy a good fighter. Hence, in the interest of developing a strong, healthy body, great emphasis was laid upon outdoor exercise, and the youths of every community contested with one another for the championship in all sorts of physical feats. They learned to run, jump and wrestle;

to display skill in the use of skates, skis, and snowshoes; to swim and row and ride horseback. At a very early age they were taught the use of offensive and defensive weapons, particularly to shoot straight, to thrust with the sword, and to swing the battle axe while defending themselves with the shield. Everything possible was done to make the future defenders of home and family honor experts in these regards.³⁹

To a greater degree than his sister, the Scandinavian boy was also instructed in intellectual and social accomplishments. In the case of sons of prominent families, this side of their education was given considerable stress. They not only committed to memory the most important heroic tales and poems handed down from past ages, but were taught the art of poetic composition as well, in order that they might properly sing the praises of contemporary heroes.⁴⁰

The art of reading and inscribing runes likewise became theirs, and many acquired a practical knowledge of the laws of the land. They learned how to entertain themselves and others by skill in indoor games and by playing upon various musical instruments. Those who expected to travel abroad, especially the sons of chieftains, learned to speak one or more languages in addition to their Northern

³⁹M. W. Williams, op. cit., p. 69.

⁴⁰J. Simpson, The Northmen Talk (London: Phoenix House, 1965).

speech; the languages most frequently acquired were probably Latin and Celtic. This was especially the case towards the end of and following the Viking Age when Christianity had established itself among the Scandinavian people. This linguistic accomplishment was perhaps most emphasized by the Icelanders, who realized their remoteness from the tide of European affairs and hence particularly stressed the desirability of gaining a knowledge of other lands, and of learning how other people lived.⁴¹ In fact, if a man wished to be a person of distinction and respect in Iceland, one or more foreign voyages were necessary. Thus, in the Saga of Bishop Pal Jonsson was written:

Pal went abroad and went to the court of Earl Harald Orkneys, and he thought very highly of him. After that he went south to England and joined a school there, and there he acquired such learning that there can hardly have been any instance of any man's acquiring so much or so deep learning in so short a time. When he came back to Iceland he stood out above all other men for the courtliness of his culture, his verse-making, and his book-learning. He was too a man with so fine a voice and such a gift for singing that his singing and his voice surpassed those of all other men who lived at the time.⁴²

Youngsters were expected to work hard; nobody was more despised than the "charcoal-chewer," the boy who obstinately hung round the cooking-hearth when everyone else was out in the fields. They were also expected to show a

⁴¹R. Keyser, Private Life of the Old Northmen (London: 1868), p. 12.

⁴²J. Simpson, The Northmen Talk (London: Phoenix House, 1965), p. 85.

bold spirit and if this took the form of standing up to their elders, they were rather admired for it. This is well illustrated in the Saga of St. Olaf:

So it is said that while King Olaf was at the banquet with Asta, his mother, she led forth her children and showed them to him. The king set Guthorm on one knee and Halfdan on the other. The king looked on the lads, then knit his brows and looked wrathfully on them, and both of the lads drooped. Then Asta bore to him her youngest son Harald, who was then three winters old. The king frowned on him, but he looked straight into his face. The king caught at the hair of the lad and pulled it, and the lad laid hold of the king's beard and pulled in return. Then said the king: "Revengeful wilt thou be later on kinsman."⁴³

At twelve years of age a boy was legally an adult. Normally he would stay at home a few years longer, but sometimes he might go on a Viking expedition even at this early age. Most young men, after gathering wealth in years of roving, returned home to a life of farming. Many, of course, chose new settlements overseas and were joined there by their kinsmen; others spent the great part of their lives as fighting-men in the service of one leader or another, and never returned to farming.⁴⁴

Physical Activities, Play, Games and Pastimes

Bodily as well as mental exercises were known under the name Idrottir. In few ancient records have we so many detailed accounts of games as we have in the Sagas and Eddas.

⁴³S. Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 110.

⁴⁴J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 144.

Added to all this is all the archaeological evidence which has been and still is being uncovered. As has been pointed out in the raising and education of children, especially boys, most attention was paid to their physical development, although considerable time was also dedicated to developing their aesthetic tastes and qualities. Physical activities, play, games and pastimes thus included and involved:

- (a) The skillful handling of weapons
- (b) Horses and chariots
- (c) Swimming and bathing
- (d) Winter travel and sports
- (e) Running and jumping
- (f) Ships and boats
- (g) Contests of strength
- (h) Ball games
- (i) Hunting and sealing
- (j) Hawking and fowling
- (k) Fishing and whaling
- (l) Music, dancing and feasting
- (m) Recitation and story telling
- (n) Table and board games
- (o) Metalwork and woodwork.

Kali, the son of Kol, who had settled in the Orkneys, well known as a kindly and accomplished man, composed the following stanza:

I am ready to play chess,
 I know nine idrottir,
 I shall scarcely forget the runes,
 I am a book-reader and smith;
 I can slide on snow-shoes,
 I shoot and row usefully,
 I know too both
 Harp playing and metres.⁴⁵

In those days of incessant warfare, physical training was considered of the highest importance. Old and young

⁴⁵P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 45.

constantly practiced games of strength and dexterity, unlike the modern-day trend, whereby people became increasingly inactive as they get older. The Vikings knew that it was only by constant exercise that they could become or remain good warriors. This made the young men supple, quick of foot, dexterous in motion, and gave them great power of endurance, ensuring a good physique. They were thus always prepared for war, and this is the key to the character of the Viking. We see what a healthy and powerful man he must have been, skillful alike to strike the fatal blow, and avoid the treacherous sword, spear or arrow. The result of such education was seen in the powerful and strong bodily frame that was attained by the youth of the country, the young man being of age and ready for war at the age of fifteen.

Next spring Half was twelve winters old, and no man was as tall or strong as he. Then he made ready to go on warfare, and had a new and well-outfitted ship.⁴⁶

There were constant competitions for the honour of the championship in each of the particular games or exercises, and young and old competed together on special grounds which were selected for that purpose, where the assembled and admiring multitude came to witness these contests. There seem to have been no prizes given to the successful competitors--at least no mention is ever made of

⁴⁶Ibid., chapter XXII.

them. All that was desired was the fame which fell to the victor, and every great warrior always excelled in the use of weapons, or in athletic exercises.⁴⁷

The End of the Viking Era

With only a few exceptions, the activities of the Vikings came to an end in the late eleventh century. A variety of factors were responsible for the cessation of this vigorous tradition of raiding and exploration which had lasted for three hundred years. Internally, as the Scandinavian monarchies became firmly established and the jarls settled into order feudal relationships somewhat like those in the rest of Europe, the scope for free-lance raiding narrowed, and the impetus for rigorous aggressive activities abroad diminished. Outside of Scandinavia the increasing political and social stabilization of the victim countries enabled them to better oppose Viking aggression. Ironically, the invasion in 1066 by the Normans, a community of Viking descendants, had such an effect on England. The Vikings already settled abroad, in France, Russia, Italy and the British Isles, were gradually absorbed into the larger indigenous populations and disappeared from history.

The Vikings were a complex people. Their roots lay in an ancient, non-feudal tradition of freedom, and for a long time they had been cut off in their remote northern

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 370.

lands from contact with the rest of Europe. They were self-conscious and naturally intelligent in a naive way; more responsive to an opportunity for quick action than for long-term perseverance; and endowed with a passion for daring ventures.⁴⁸

The impact of the Vikings, despite its dramatic qualities, had not been great. No doubt they brought new impulses and ferments to Europe, but they effected no fundamental political transformation there. They left behind a body of fine literature and mythology, and they sprinkled the English language with their vocabulary. They were a people of marked artistic talents--of which they have left ample evidence in the discoveries of archaeology and in the great treasures of Icelandic literature. But the Vikings probably gained more from Europe than they contributed. Their architecture, for example, was greatly improved, and they were converted to Christianity. When at last the Viking Age faded into history the Vikings left a North after them that was animated by these European influences, a North not weakened but changed by being led into a new cultural life.⁴⁹

⁴⁸E. Oxenstierna, op. cit., pp. 290 ff.

⁴⁹J. Brondsted, op. cit., pp. 317 ff.

Chapter II

THE SKILFUL HANDLING OF WEAPONS

Type and Use of Weapons

A Viking's weapons of attack consisted of the sword, axe, spear, bow and arrows and dagger. Of these the sword and axe took pride: any self-respecting Viking bore them about him always. The most important defensive equipment of the Vikings was the wooden, leather or metal shield, the iron coat of mail and the leather or iron helmet. Woven tapestries from the Norwegian Oseberg ship depict white-coloured mail-coats covering the whole body and topped with a hood.¹ Archaeology has uncovered a large number of Viking weapons of all descriptions.

While on the subject of Viking weapons it is perhaps appropriate to refer again to that strange species of Viking warrior known as the berserk, and also to Viking "champions."

The berserks were violent, half-mad fighters who possessed terrifying strength while battle-fever, or "berserksganger" was upon them, only to relapse afterwards into stupor and lethargy. When within sight of their foe berserks wrought themselves into such a state of frenzy, that they bit their shields and rushed forward to the attack, throwing away their arms of defence, reckless of every danger, sometimes having nothing but a club, which carried with it

¹J. Brondsted, The Vikings (London: Penquin Books, 1965), p. 123.

death and destruction.

In Gisli Surrson's Saga is written:

In the time of Hakon, Aethelstan's foster-son, there lived in Norway Bjorn the Pale, who was a Berserk. He went around the country and challenged men to holmganga (duel) if they would not do his will.²

This berserk-fury was not only utilized in war, but for the performance of difficult feats which were held to be out of the power of ordinary people. In some cases this fury seems to have come over the Berserks apparently without cause, when they trembled and gnashed their teeth. Nils Lid is of the opinion that they are to be regarded as a sort of psychopath selected for their exceptional strength and ferocity, and formed into special corps in the service of a king or chieftain. Thus, during battle, they would incite each other to mad frenzy. In the Hervarar Saga:

The Berserk Arngrim of Bolm had twelve sons; they were all great Berserks. They went on warfare when they were quite young and ravaged far and wide, but met with no equal in strength and courage; thereby they got renown and victory. The twelve brothers went together on one ship with no others. All the brothers had excellent holmganga swords. It was their custom if they were only with their own men when they found the berserks gang coming over them, to go ashore and wrestle with large stones or trees, otherwise they would have slain their friends in their rage. Never did they engage in battle without gaining the victory; therefore great sayings were told of them.³

²G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, Origines Islandicae (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), p. 195.

³P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1890), p. 424.

Legend claims the Berserks feared neither fire nor weapons. In war they fought without coats of mail. They were invariably mercenary offering their services to the highest bidder. In the Eyrbyggja Saga is written:

With Hakon Jarl were two brothers of Swedish kin: one was named Halli, the other Leiknir. They were much taller and stronger men than were to be found in Norway or in other places. They went berserking, and when they were angry lost their human nature and went mad like dogs; they feared neither fire nor iron, but in everyday life they were not bad to have intercourse with if they were not offended, though they were most overbearing if offended.⁴

Similar to but not nearly as ferocious and frenzied as the Berserks were the champions or "Kapps," who were superior in the handling of weapons, in courage and in strength to the average man. To be considered the foremost champion in the district or settlement was the ambition of every great warrior, and to attain this proud position was no easy task among so many men who were equally brave and perfectly reckless of their lives, and thoroughly skilled in the handling of weapons.

It was the aim of every great chief to gather around him the greatest champions of the land, and if he were renowned for bravery, liberality and convivial qualities, they would come to him from even the remotest parts of the North. In The Story of the Ynglings we read of such champions:

⁴P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., p. 426.

Now King Haki went with his army to Sweden against King Hugleik. So King Hugleik gathered together a host against him, and there came into his fellowship two brethren, Swipdag and Geigad, men of fame both, and the greatest of champions. King Haki had twelve champions with him, and Starkad the Old was then of his fellowship, and King Haki himself withal was the greatest of champions. They met on Fryri's meads, and a great battle befell there, and anon Hugleik's folk fell fast; then set on those chiefs, Swipdag and Geigad, but Haki's champions went six against each, and they were taken. Then went Haki into the shield-burg against Hugleik the King, and slew him there and his two sons withal.⁵

Sometimes meetings took place within a Viking community called "Vapnathing," where all the "boendr," who formed the great middle class or back-bone of Scandinavian society, had to appear, and produce for inspection the arms which every man was legally obliged to have. In the Earlier Gulathings Law was stated:

Wherever a weapon-thing is to be, the King's steward (arman) shall announce it in the autumn, and hold the Thing in the Spring. All free and full grown men shall come to it or pay a fine of three aurar each. Then men shall show their weapons as is laid down in the laws. A man shall have a broad-axe or a sword, a spear and a shield which must have at least iron rims across it, and whose handle must be fastened with iron nails. Three aurar are to be paid for every folk-weapon missing or not in good order. For every rowing-bench the boendr shall furnish two dozen arrows and one bow. One eyrir shall be paid for every missing arrow, and three aurar for a bow.⁶

That warlike exercises should have played such a prominent part in physical education is not surprising. Some

⁵ Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), volume I, p. 38.

⁶ P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, p. 531.

men could change weapons from one hand to the other during the hottest fight, use both hands with equal facility, throw two spears with great force at the same time, or catch a spear in its flight. In Njala's Saga:

Gunnar Hammundson lived at Hlidarendi in Fljotshlid. He was of large size and strength, and more skilled in fight than any other man. He could shoot and strike with both hands equally when he wanted; he moved his sword so swiftly that it seemed as if three swords were in the air. He shot better with a bow than anyone else, and never missed his aim. He could leap as well backwards as forwards, more than his height in full war-dress. He could swim like a seal, and there was no game in which any man was able to cope with him, and it has been told that no man was his equal.⁷

Playing with "dirks" or short swords was common practice. It consisted in playing simultaneously with three short swords, or dirks, so that one was always in the air, while one was in each hand; as one was thrown up the player caught the falling one. This game was called handsax.

A very uncommon accomplishment was to run on the oar-blades around a ship while it was being rowed. Among those who could do this was Olaf Tryggvason, who, while he was walking over his ship, the "Long Serpent," on the oar-blades of the rowers, could play with three dirks or short swords. Thus in the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason:

On the third day the king said to Eindridi: "Now the weather is fine and calm, and we will try the handsax game." The men went out to look on; each took two saxes, and they played with them for a while.

Then a third sax was given to each, and they played

⁷Ibid., volume II, p. 383.

so that all the time one was in the air and two in their hands; they always caught them by the handle, and no one could determine who was most skilled. After a long while the king said: "This game has not yet had sufficient trail."

They went down to the shore and out on a large long-ship, and the king bade his men row the ship, and the king then walked outside the board, on the oars along the side of the ship, and there played with three handsaxes as skilfully as before on land; and Eindridi did the same. The king played first and Eindridi after him. The king then went again in the same manner along the oars, and thus in front of the stern, not dropping the handsaxes, and not even getting his shoes wet; he came back along the other side on the oars and up into the ship. No one could understand how he did this. Eindridi stood before the king when he came upon the ship, and looked at him in silence. The king said: "Why dost thou stand, and not try after me?" Eindridi replied: "You, lord, could by no means do this with your idrott alone, without the power of that God in whom you believe; and from this I see that he is all-powerful, and therefore I shall henceforth believe that he and no one else is the only God."⁸

It is interesting to note here that shortly before the events related above took place, Olaf Tryggvason had been converted to Christianity in Sicily.⁹

Among such warlike and Spartan-like people the chiefs had to be the foremost in all athletic and gymnastic exercises if they wished to enjoy the respect and confidence of the people, and have to rule over them. To talk of their forefather's feats was not sufficient; they had to show themselves worthy of them, and if incapable of ruling, they were deposed by the people in the Assembly of the people called the Thing.

⁸Ibid., volume II, p. 383.

⁹Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 262.

There are several examples in the sagas of powerful chiefs showing their anger and jealousy when any man excelled them. The Saga of Olaf the Holy reads as follows:

Olaf Haraldson, as he grew up, was a man of scarce high middle stature, but very thick-set, and dark of thew; light red of hair, broad-faced, bright and ruddy of countenance, of eyes wondrous good, fair-eyed and swift-eyed, so that it was awful to look him in the face if he were wroth. Olaf was a man of mickle skill in many matters; he knew well the craft of the bow, and of all men was the best in shooting of hand-shot; a good swimmer, deft and skilful in all smith's work; his own no less than other men's. He was called Olaf the Thick. He was bold of speech and clear-spoken, early fulfilled of all ripeness, both as to pith and wisdom; beloved was he of all his kindred and acquaintance; masterful in games, and would be at the head of all others, as was but due because of his dignity and birth.¹⁰

This intense desire to excel and their love for arms was accompanied by the extraordinary courage of the Vikings and scorn for danger and even death. Adam of Bremen wrote:

The Danes are remarkable for this, that if they have committed any crime, they had rather suffer death than blows. There is no other punishment for them but either the axe or servitude. As for groans, complaints and other bemoanings of that kind, in which we find relief, they are so detested by the Danes, that they think it mean to weep for their sins, or for the death of their dearest relations.¹¹

To die with his arms in his hand was the vow of every free man; and the pleasing idea they had of this kind of death would naturally lead them to dread such as proceeded from disease and old age. Valerius Maximus wrote:

¹⁰Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 4.

¹¹M. Mallet, Northern Antiquities (New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 149.

The philosophy of the Ambri is gay and courageous: they leap for joy in battle, that they are going to quit life in so glorious a manner: in sickness they lament for fear of a shameful and miserable end.¹²

The history of ancient Scandinavia is full of passages expressive of this manner of thinking. The illustrious warriors, who found themselves wasting by some lingering illness, were not always content barely to accuse their fate. They often availed themselves of the few moments that were yet remaining, to die more gloriously. Some of them would be carried into the field of battle, that they might die in the engagement. Others committed suicide, or requested their friends to kill them, a duty considered most sacred. If none of these reliefs were afforded, and especially when Christianity had banished such practices, the heroes consoled themselves at least by putting on complete armour and battle-dress as soon as they found their end approaching; thus making, as it were, a solemn protest against the kind of death to which they were forced involuntarily to submit.

As can be expected, not many of the Viking warriors were openly guilty of cowardice, and the bare suspicion of that vice was always attended with universal contempt. A man could be provoked to fight a duel by publicly calling him "Nithing," which signified an infamous, dastardly coward. Nithing was unquestionably the most insulting epithet that a Viking could apply to an adversary. There was moreover, a

¹²Ibid., p. 150.

peculiar way of applying it that greatly increased its virulence, although it gave the aggrieved party the right to seek redress by an action at law. This was by setting up what was called a Nithing-post. A mere hazel twig stuck in the ground by a person who at the same uttered a superstitious epithet, either against an individual or a community, was quite sufficient to come under the legal definition of Nithing-post.¹³

Finally, as an example of Viking courage, their Trial by Ordeal is described. The ordeal was a ceremony performed under different forms in order to prove the innocence or the truth of an accusation, and was preceded by an oath. Two common ordeals were boiling-hot water and red-hot irons. The latter is illustrated in the Saga of Sigurd Jorsalofari:

Then Sigurd let Harald be called, and told him that he would allow him to undergo the ordeal to prove who was his father. Sigurd said that Harald should walk on iron-bars to prove his fatherhood; but that ordeal was thought to be rather hard, for he had to suffer it for the sake of his fatherhood and not for his kingship, which he had before renounced by oath. Harald assented to this. He fasted before he walked on the irons and suffered the ordeal, the severest in Norway, that nine red-hot plough shares were to be laid down, and Harald to walk over them with his bare feet, and two bishops to lead him. Three days afterwards the ordeal was tried, and the result was that his feet were not burnt. Thereafter Sigurd acknowledged the kinsmanship of Harald.¹⁴

¹³Ibid., p. 155.

¹⁴P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, p. 562.

Duelling

The custom of duelling, which was frequently referred to as a form of ordeal, prevailed very extensively.

There were two kinds of duel, the "einvigi" and the "holmganga." When used as a form of ordeal, or means of proof, if the challenge was victorious, then the object demanded was his, for his victory was thought to be the judgment of the gods. In Egil's Saga we read:

It was the law of the Holmganga in those times, that if he who challenged another man in order to get something gained the victory, he should have the prize for which he challenged; but if he were defeated, he should release himself with as much property as had been agreed upon; but if he fell in the holmganga he should forfeit all his property, and he who killed him was to take all the inheritance.¹⁵

In the einvigi there were no settled rules, and each party could use such weapons as he wished, and proposed in such a manner as he thought most advantageous to himself. It was the simpler mode of duelling. One of its peculiarities was that the place for the fight was marked out. The combatants were allowed to use other weapons besides swords, and carried their shields themselves. In the holmganga the shield was carried for them.

The holmganga, which took place after a formal challenge at which the time and place were fixed, was the form of duelling that chiefly prevailed. Its rules were most strict

¹⁵Ibid., p. 563.

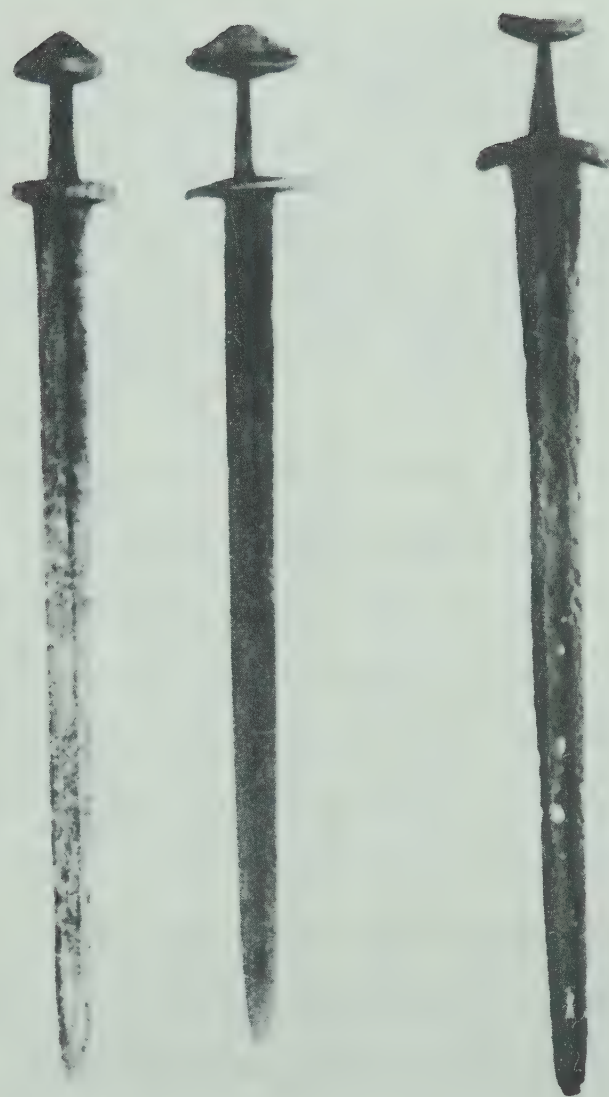


Fig. 2. Viking swords.

and binding, and were regulated by a code of law called the "holmganga laws."

The laws of duelling seem to have been recited before the combat. In the Saga of Bjorn Hitdvelakappi, Bjorn said:

I left my country because I wanted to seek fame; there are now two choices before me: the one to bravely get victory, though that is unlikely, in fighting against this man; the other is to fall with valour like a man, and that is better than to live in shame and not dare to win honour for the king. I will fight against Kaldimar. The king thanked him, and the laws of the holmganga were read. The champion had an excellent sword called "Moering." They fought hard and eagerly; at last the champion fell, but Bjorn received a severe wound; on this account he got great fame and honour from the king.¹⁶

The Holmganga derived its name from the fact that the combatants originally fought upon a small island (holm), partly in order that they might not be disturbed and parted against their will, and partly that the fighting place might have a natural border, over which they could not retire.

In later times, instead of an island, places were marked out for duels; and though they were sometimes marked by stones in a ring, they were nevertheless called holm because the laws of holmganga prevented anyone from passing the boundary. The combatants had sometimes to fight on a cloak, and were allowed to use three shields, in case any of them got broken. They did not always carry the shield themselves, each combatant having a friend to hold it, who was called "skjaldsvein" (shield man). Swords of certain length

¹⁶Ibid., p. 564.

only were allowed, and it seems that they were used for striking rather than thrusting. Kormak's Saga relates a duel that took place in Norway between chief Kormak and a man called Bersi. These happenings occurred during the reign of King Harald Fairhair, 860 A.D. to 930 A.D. With regards to the laws of the Holmganga:

This was the Holmganga law: that the cloak should be ten feet from one end to the other, with loops in the corners, and in these should be put down pegs, having a head at the upper end; these were called tjosnur. Three squares, each one foot wider, must be marked around the cloak. On each of the corners of the outside square must be placed a pole called hoslur (hazel poles): it was called hazelled field when it was prepared thus.

Each man must have three shields, and when these were made useless he must stand upon the cloak, even if he had walked out of it before, and thereafter defend himself with his weapons.

He who had been challenged was to strike first. If one was wounded so that the blood came upon the cloak, he was not obliged to fight any longer. If either stepped with one of his feet outside the hazel poles, it was held he had retreated; and if he stepped outside with both, he was held to have fled. One man was to hold the shield before each of the combatants. The one who had received the most wounds was to pay as holmlausn (indemnity for being released from the fight) three marks of silver.¹⁷

The duel between Kormak and Bersi went as follows:

A cloak was spread under their feet. Bersi said, "Thou Kormak did challenge me to the holmganga, but instead of it I offer thee einvigi. Thou art young and little experienced, and at holmganga there are difficult rules, but none whatever at einvigi." Kormak answered, "I shall not fight better in einvigi, and I will risk this, and in all be on equal footing with thee." Bersi said, "Thou shalt have thy way."

Thorgils held the shield of his brother (Kormak), and

¹⁷G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, op. cit., volume I, p. 320.

Thord Arndisarson that of Bersi, who struck the first blow and deft Kormak's shield. Kormak struck at Bersi in the same way. Each of them spoiled three shields for the other. Then Kormak had to strike; he struck, and Bersi parried with Hviting (name of his sword). Skofnung (name of Kormak's sword) cut off its point in front of the ridge, and the sword-point fell on Kormak's hand, and he was wounded in the thumb, whose joint was rent, and blood came on the cloak. Thereupon men intervened, and did not want them to go on fighting. Kormak said, "It is little victory which Bersi has got from my accident, though we part now."¹⁸

Later in the saga the feud continues with a duel being fought between Bersi and Thorkel:

Bersi had a shield and a long keen sword. Thorkel said, "The sword which thou wearest, Bersi, is longer than the laws allow."

"It shall not be so" said Bersi, and brandishing Hviting with both hands he struck Thorkel his death blow.¹⁹

Causes of frequent duelling were challenges given on account of land and women. Some men, especially Beserks, went about from place to place making duelling a profession. It was quite common for a maid who had several suitors to say that she would accept the one who should be victorious in a duel. This often resulted in the death of one or more of the combatants; and it appears that even fathers were sometimes challenged by the suitors. In Orvar Odd's Saga:

The King thought it over with double care, and it seemed to him a perplexing matter that these two chiefs should strive so hard for his daughter. He answered that either one of them was so great and high-born that he would refuse her to neither; he asked her to choose which

¹⁸ Ibid., volume II, pp. 333 ff.

¹⁹ Ibid., volume II, p. 336.

of them she would like to marry. She said that if her father wanted her to marry she would marry the man of whom she knew good, and not the one of whom she knew only evil, as she had heard of the sons of Arngrim. When Hjarvard heard her words, he challenged Hjalmar to single fight south in Samsey; he said he should be called nithing (coward) by every man if he married the maiden without accepting the challenge. Hjalmar said he was quite ready, and the time of the fight was at once appointed.²⁰

There seems to have been a peculiar kind of holmganga called "Keranga," but the rules and regulations concerning this method of duelling are not explained. The Keranga is mentioned in the Floamanna Saga:

He (Thorgils) went on a trading journey to Upland and Sweden and dwelt in the winter at the house of a bondi called Thrاند, a wealthy man who had a daughter called Sigrid. A man called Randvid wished to marry her; he was a wicked man, and a great champion. Thrанд refused his consent to the marriage; then Randvid offered to Thrанд a kind of holmganga, which is called Keranga (tub-going). The fight takes place in a tub (bathroom) which is closed above, and Thrанд preferred to fight with a wooden club rather than marry his daughter to so wicked a man.²¹

It seems to have been customary, after duels, to offer sacrifice of one or two oxen, which the victor slaughtered. In Egils' Saga:

A large and old bull was led forward; it was called sacrifice-bull; he who got the victory was to kill it. Sometimes one bull was sacrificed; sometimes each of the combatants brought one.²²

During the reign of King Knut (1028-1035 A.D.) of

²⁰P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, 571.

²¹Ibid., volume I, p. 567.

²²Ibid.

Norway, duelling was abolished in Norway, and robbers and Beserks were outlawed. Evidence of this is found in

Gretti's Saga:

The last summer before the one when Eirik Jarl Hakonsson, made ready to go west to England to visit King Knut the Great, his brother-in-law, he placed his son Hakon as ruler over Norway, and gave him into the hands of his own brother Svein Jarl to look after and govern for him, because Hakon was a child in age. Before Eirik Jarl left, he summoned to him the chiefs and powerful boendr; they talked much about the laws and customs of the land, for Eirik Jarl was a wise ruler. The men thought it a great barbarity in the land, that rioters or Beserks challenged high-born men for the sake of their property or women, and that the one who fell should have no indemnity paid for his slaying; many suffered disgrace and loss of property, and some lost their life; therefore Eirik Jarl abolished all holmgangas in Norway, and outlawed all robbers and Beserks who went about plundering.²³

There is, also, the possibility of gladiatorial contests being held in Scandinavia during the Viking Age, similar to but not on the same scale as those of the Roman Empire. Beautiful glass objects have been unearthed by archaeologists in Scandinavia, on which are depicted gladiators engaged in combat, and animals, such as bulls and bears, fighting each other. But these ornaments are in all probability of Roman and Greek origin, the result of Viking trade in the Mediterannean. Some historians, however, are of the opinion that the Vikings themselves indulged in such activities from time to time, often for the purpose of public amusement.

In this respect Keyser wrote:

²³Ibid., volume I, p. 576.

It seems that in olden times the Northmen occasionally made their criminals do battle for life and death with wild animals, or else among themselves, for public amusement.

Thus King Harald Fair-hair made an Icelfander, Bue Andridesson, against whom he was exasperated, fight with a wild savage from the interior of Asia. The battle took place on an open plain, in the presence of the king, and of a large number of spectators. A large stone stood in the middle of the plain, pointed above, but of goodly circumference towards the base; and it was the aim of either of the combatants to throw his adversary on this stone in order to kill him. They were allowed no weapons, but might only wrestle. Bue gave his opponent a heavy throw on the stone, whereby his breastbone was crushed in, whereupon the king received him into his favour.

A story is told of Hacon Jarl that he made an Icelfander named Finneboge the Strong, who had killed one of the Jarl's kinsmen, fight with a wild man. The Jarl, it is said made all his warriors assemble at the place of combat, and had his chair placed in the midst. Finneboge proved victorious and broke the wild man's back on the stone. But even then the Jarl would not forgive him, and was obliged a little while after, to fight with a large tame bear, which belonged to the Jarl, while swimming in the sea. Finneboge succeeded in killing the brute, whereupon the Jarl pardoned him.²⁴

King Olaf Tryggvison it seems, also initiated practices of this nature:

King Olaf was the gladdest of all men. Kind he was and lowly-hearted; exceeding keen in all matters; bountiful of gifts; very glorious of attire; before all men for high heart in battle. But the grimmest of all men was he in his wrath, and marvellous pains laid he upon his foes. Some he burnt in the fire; some he let wild hounds tear assunder; some he stoned or cast down from high rocks. Now for all these things was he well beloved of his friends, and dreaded of his foes.²⁵

²⁴R. Keyser, The Private Life of the Old Norsemen (London: Chapman and Hall, 1868), pp. 159 ff.

²⁵Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 341.

Archery

Archery was not only a mode of warfare and used in hunting, but was also a popular form of amusement with the Vikings. Children were taught from a fairly early age in the use of the bow. In the Edda poem "Rigsmal" we find considerable information about Viking-age society. This is a didactic poem that seeks to show a chief's son how he should conduct himself, what skills he should acquire, and what may be expected of him:

The Jarl grew up
There in the house;
Shook the lind,
Laid the strings,
Bent the elm,
Shafted the arrows,
Threw the javelins,
Shook the spears,
Rode Horses,
Set on the Hounds,
Brandished the sword,
Practiced swimming.²⁶

The best archers were considered to be the Thelemarkians of Norway and the Jomsvikings, having distinguished themselves at the battle of Bravalla.

Skill in archery encompassed not only accuracy but also speed and power of the arrow. This is illustrated in

The Story of Olaf Tryggvison:

Now Einar Thambarskelvir was abroad the Worm (name of the ship) aft in the main-hold; and he shot with the bow and was the hardest shooting of all men. Einar shot at

²⁶P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, p. 489.

Earl Eric and the arrow smote the tiller-head above the head of the Earl, and went in up to the shaft binding. The Earl looked thereon and asked if they wist who shot; and even therewith came another arrow so nigh that it flew betwixt the Earl's side and his arm, and so on into the staying board of the steersman, and the point stood out far beyond.²⁷

But accuracy with the bow was, of course, also a quality held in high esteem. Once again we turn to the Saga of Olaf Tryggvison to illustrate this:

The next day they went to the woods, not far from the farm. The king took off his cloak, placed a target on the hill-slope, and marked out a long-shooting distance. Then a bow and arrow were given to him. He shot and the arrow hit the target near its edge and stuck there. Eindridi's shot farther in on the target, but not in the middle. The king then shot a second time; they went to the target and the arrow was in the middle, and all called it a famous shot. Eindridi also praised the king's skill, and said he thought it was not worth his while to try again. The king told him to give up if he liked, and acknowledge himself beaten in this idrott. Eindridi replied that it might be so, but still he would try again; he shot and his arrow entered the notch for the bow-string of the king's last arrow, so that both of them stuck there. The king said: "A very skilled man art thou at idrottir, but this idrott has not yet been fully tried. That handsome boy shall now be taken whom thou saidst thou lovest so well the other day and he shall be a target as I direct." The king let a piece of hnefatafl (chess-piece) be placed on the boy's head. "Now we will shoot that piece down from the boy's head" said the king, "so that he shall not be hurt."

"You can do that if you wish, but I will certainly take revenge if the boy is harmed," replied Eindridi. A long linen cloth was tied around the boy's head, and two men held the ends so that he could not move his head when he heard the whistling of the arrow. The king went to the place where he was to stand, and made the mark of the cross before himself and before the point of the arrow before he shot; but Eindridi grew very red in the face. The arrow flew under the piece, and carried it off the boy's head, but so near the skull that blood dripped from the top of his head. The king then told

²⁷Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 371.

Eindridi to shoot after him if he wished; but Eindridi's mother and sister begged him, weeping sorely, not to try it. Eindridi said to the king: "I am not afraid that if I risked shooting that I should do the boy any harm, but nevertheless I will not shoot this time."

Then said the king: "It seems to me that thou must acknowledge thyself beaten."²⁸

Spear and Stone Throwing

Spear and stone throwing were both important means of attack. Naturally accuracy and strength were both emphasised here, and in times of peace these activities would become forms of amusement.

Skill in throwing the spear was thus greatly valued, and must have been constantly practiced. Some men could throw two spears at once, one from each hand; this was one of the most famous feats of King Olaf Tryggvison:

King Olaf was of all men told of the most prowess in Norway in all matters; he smote well alike with either hand, and shot with two spears at once.²⁹

Another skilled feat often described in the sagas was to catch a spear in mid-air and fling it back at the enemy without a pause. This was done by dodging to one side, catching the passing spear with a backhanded movement, and sweeping one's arm around in a backward circle so that the spear was brought around and up again all in one movement, and was pointing the right way for the return cast.³⁰

²⁸P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 382.

²⁹Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 340.

³⁰J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 124



Fig. 3. Swedish spearheads and axehead.



Fig. 4. Ornamental Danish iron axehead inlaid with silver.

Throwing stones by hand was known as hand-shot:

Sturla walked about outside, and took a stone; he threw stones better than any man, and usually hit the mark. He said: "It seems to me if I wished to throw a stone, that I, rather than you, would choose where it should hit; but I will not try it now," and he threw down the stone.³¹

The sling, however, was more effective in propelling stones and pebbles, especially in sea fights, and the art was brought to perfection by practice and competition. Slings were also used on land by bodies of men who had no other weapons. The stone-throwers are mentioned as occupying the flanks in King Hedin's army; and the slingers stood in the last ranks of King Hrings order of battle on Bravalla heath. In Kjalnesinga Saga:

Bui would never carry any weapon but a sling, which he always wore tied round him. Bui was outlawed because he did not want to sacrifice. Once when he was on a journey, Thorstein, a son of the chief Thorgrim, attacked him with eleven men. Bui had come to a hill called Kleberg, where he saw them pursuing them; he stopped and gathered some stones. Thorstein and his men went fast, and when they had passed a brook which was there, they heard the sling of Bui whistle and a stone flew; it struck the breast of one of Thorstein's men and killed him. Bui sent more stones and hit a man with each one. By this time Thorstein had almost come up to him. Bui retreated down the hill on the other side.³²

These military exercises comprised of archery (bogaskot), throwing stones (handshot), using a sling (slongva) and duelling with a sword (skilming), came under

³¹P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, p. 94.

³²Ibid., p. 94.

the collective heading of "vaprifimi."³³

In conclusion here, it should be mentioned that the Sagas were bound to exaggerate at times, especially when relating the feats of kings or great men. But there were stories that the common man wanted to hear, and it is conceivable that memories of these Sagas spurred men on to greater courage in times of war and stress.

³³R. Keyser, op. cit., p. 152.

Chapter III

HORSES AND CHARIOTS

Horse Riding

The favourite animal of the Vikings was the horse, and a warrior's charger and his dog were often buried with him. The rider's outfit, spurs, stirrups, bridle, bit, reins, saddle, collar-harness and buckles afforded ample opportunity for fine ornamentation. In a grave at Birka, Sweden, there was found a bridle made of leather decorated with studs of silvered bronze; and on the south Danish Island of Langeland was a chieftain's grave containing spurs and stirrups adorned with superb silver inlay of elegant pattern. A Viking horseman in all his splendour must have been a sight well worth seeing. Across the horse's mane lay the carved collar-harness; a bronze-mounted piece of wood with holes through which the reins were passed. The saddles found in Norway were of wood and seemed to have been placed well forward on horse, so that the rider's legs pointed forward. Stirrups--originally invented on the steppes of Eurasia--appeared in Viking Age Scandinavia in two forms, both of iron, but deriving from primitive types in leather and wood. One is an iron version of the simple narrow leather strap; the other copied in iron, often finely inlaid, the same type of strap together with its inset rectangular wooden foot-rest. The vertical bars of the stirrups were frequently decorated with silver or copper inlay. Another item in the riding outfit, according to Norwegian evidence, was a kind

of rattle, whose noise was probably intended to keep evil spirits away.¹

The Vikings were expert horsemen and spent much time in training their horses. In the Story of the Ynglings we read:

Alrek and Eric, sons of Agni, were kings in his stead; mighty men were they and great warriors and skilled in manly deeds; their want was to ride horses and break them both to the amble and the gallop, and greater was their skill therein than of any other men; and with the utmost eagerness they strove with each other which rode the better, and had the best horses. On a time the two brethren rode away from other men, with their best horses, taking their way out into a certain mead, and never came back; and when men went to seek them, they found them both dead, and the head of each one all to-broken, but no weapon had they save the bits of their horses; and men deemed they had slain each other therewith.²

On many of the runestones are depicted Viking warriors and chieftains riding horses which look as if they are fast-stepping.³ Some horses were so well trained that they would be ridden by one master only. The following extract comes from the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson:

Sigurd and the sons of Gjuki rode up on to the mountain, and Gunnar was then to ride through the flickering flame; he had a horse called Goti, and that horse did not dare leap the fire. Then Sigurd and Gunnar exchanged their outward shape and their names too, because Grani (name of Sigurd's horse) would not

¹J. Bronsted, The Vikings (London: Penguin Books 1965), p. 125.

²Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), volume I, p. 35.

³F. R. Donovan, The Vikings (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), p. 41.

move when ridden by anyone but Sigurd; then Sigurd mounted Grani and rode through the flickering flame.⁴

It is not surprising, then, to find that the Vikings placed great value on good horses, and that horses were popular as pets. The comfort and individual appearance of the horses, as well as their equipment and trappings, received the attention of their masters. Their coats were rubbed smooth and glossy and their manes and forelocks and tails were brushed and kept trimmed. Blankets of skin or "wadmal" were thrown over them for protection against the cold, and their feet were shielded when travelling over rough ground, by iron shoes, not nailed to the horse's hoof, as now, but made with parts projecting over the sides of the hoof by which the shoes were strapped to the foot.⁵ In the Story of the Ynglings:

Now King Adils had great joyance in good horses, and had the best horses of that time; Slinger was the name of one of his horses, and another he had he called Raven; him he took from Ali dead, and of him was begotten another horse who was called Raven, which he sent to Halogaland to King Godquest; and King Godquest backed him, but might not stay him ere he was cast from his back, and gat his bane thereby; and this befell at Omd, in Halogaland.⁶

When in battle the Vikings fought on foot. They

⁴J. Simpson, The Northmen Talk (London: Phoenix House, 1965), p. 46.

⁵E. D. Schonfeld, Das Pferd im Dienste des Islanders zur Sagazeit (Jena, 1900), p. 41.

⁶Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 50.

naturally used horses to deploy their raiding-bands swiftly, and in their art they often showed mounted warriors. But all descriptions of warfare made it clear that those who rode to the battlefield dismounted there, tethering their horses before the fighting began. This was also the case among the Anglo-Saxons, as the poem The Battle of Maldon described; similarly, in the battle scenes on the Gotland stones the horses are shown riderless, either held or tethered. Archeology confirms this; the horses laid in Viking graves may have rich harness, stirrups and other trappings near them, but there was never a trace of any horse armour, such as would surely have been invented if it had been the custom to use steeds in battle.

Norwegian settlers bound for Iceland and Greenland usually took their horses with them. At the time such animals were smaller than they are today, so that ships, small by present-day standards, could accommodate them as well as the settlers with all their gear.⁷ In time of war, however, the Vikings seldom took their horses with them; it was easier to find them in the foreign country.

During the summer months horses were invariably used whilst hunting. King Egil's death is described in The Story of the Ynglings as follows:

Now King Egil was a mighty hunter, and oft he rode

⁷B. Almgren (ed.), The Viking (Milan: Officine Grafiche di Enrico Berinzagi and Co., 1966), p. 27.

day-long through the woods a-hunting wild deer; and so on a time, whenas he had ridden with his men to the hunting, the king chased a certain deer a long while, and had followed after it on the spur into the woods away from all his folk; then was he aware of that bull, and rode to him and would slay him. The bull turned to meet him, and the king got a thrust at him, but the spear glanced from off him; then the deer thrust his horn into the horse's flank, so that he fell flat, and the king with him. The king leapt to his feet, and would draw his sword, but the bull thrust his horns into the breast of the king, so that they stood deep therein. Then came the king's goodmen thereto, and slew the bull. The king lived but a little while, and was laid in mound at Upsala.⁸

In summer, the chief means of transport was the horse, for riding, as a pack animal and for drawing wagons. As already mentioned, the horses were mainly of a small breed with thicker necks and shorter backs.

As can be expected, horses were often given as gifts, especially to kings and chiefs. Thus in the Fommanna Sogur:

At that time there was wayfaring a man called Harek, a kinsman of Thorstein's. He brought his ship into Midfirth, and in those days was great dearth here in Iceland. But Odd bade him stay with him, and all his crew as many as he would send. Odd sent out with him a gift to Thorstein, certain good stallions red of hue and white-maned, and said that he had been his life-giver. Harek fared out in summer, and happened on Thorstein, who was still with King Harold, and brought him the horses, and said that Odd had sent them to him.⁹

Horses, together with oxen, sheep, boars and falcons were, in pagan Scandinavia, sacrificed to the gods Thor, Odin and Frey. These sacrificial ceremonies were usually

⁸ Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 46.

⁹ W. Morris and E. Magnusson (ed.), The Saga Library (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1891), volume I, p. 174.

divided into two parts: first the slaughtering of the animals, and reddening of the temple and altars with blood; then the sacrificial feast. The flesh of the slaughtered animals was cooked in large kettles hanging over fires in the temple. The people then assembled to eat it seated along the walls. At first Christianity had difficulty in stamping out these practices and Christians had to pay a fine in order to be exempted from these sacrificial ceremonies.¹⁰

Sometimes human beings as well as horses and dogs were sacrificed and then hung up in what was regarded to as a sacred grove near the temple. The most famous literary source is Adam of Bremen's famous descriptions of the most renowned temple of the north, that at Old Upsala, still flourishing when he wrote around 1070, as the centre of paganism and strong resistance to Christianity:

The sacrifice on this occasion involves the slaughter of nine males of every creature, with whose blood the gods are placated. The bodies are hung in a grove near the temple, a sanctuary so holy that each tree is regarded as itself divine, in consequence of the death and decay of the victims. Dogs and horses hang there beside human beings, and a Christian has told me that he has seen as many as seventy-two carcasses hanging there side by side.¹¹

Horsefights

The aggressiveness of the Vikings in sports and

¹⁰H. R. Ellis, Pagan Scandinavia (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), chapter 5.

¹¹J. Brondsted, op. cit., p. 284.

games is explained in part by the fact that personal honour was so easily involved in success in such contests. This was even the case in the horse-fights so much loved in Norway and Iceland from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries; the more fiercely a stallion kicked and bit, the greater his owner's glory. Horse-fighting was an ancient sport shown on the sixth-century Swedish Haggeby Stone;¹² originally it may have been part of the cult of the fertility-god Frey (to whom horses were sacred), and in more modern times it was associated with harvest festivals in Norway. In 1618 a Norwegian Bishop wrote:

A crowd of people congregate on St. Bartholomew's Day with their horses from all the district around, and the horses are set to bite each other two by two, the notion being that when they bite each other lustily there will be a good crop, and vice versa.¹³

The Sagas give us a good picture of Icelandic horse-fights. Horses with large front fore-teeth were usually trained for horse-fighting. The owners of these horses would make an appointment among themselves for a horse-fight, which was always attended by a large crowd, including women. An open plain with rising ground was usually chosen for the battle-ground with the spectators setting on the elevated ground. The stallions were then brought out in pairs, and in order to enrage them against one another, they would have

¹²H. R. Ellis, op. cit., p. 91.

¹³J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 161.



Fig. 5. A horsefight in Iceland from an ancient drawing.



Fig. 6. A horsefight depicted on a pictorial stone.



Fig. 7. Danish iron spur inlaid with silver.

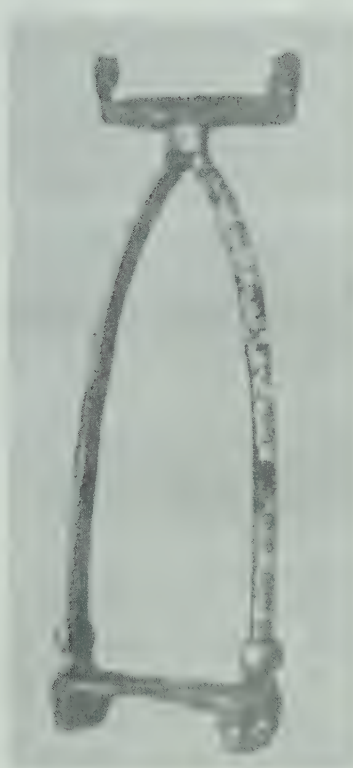


Fig. 8. Danish iron stirrup inlaid with silver.



Fig. 9. Richly ornamented Danish horse-collar.

some mares tied up close by. Each stallion was led by either the owner himself, or by a man whom the horse knew well. When they reared up and began to attack one another with their teeth and front hooves, the men who followed them had to incite his own horse on, which they generally did by driving them on with a staff, which they carried in their hands for this purpose. It was forbidden to use this stick on the opponent's horse, but, of course, this rule was often broken. The most renowned chieftains used often to accompany their own horses to the battle, and sometimes got themselves appointed as judges in horse-fights in which their own stallions were not engaged. It was of no rare occurrence for two men who were urging the stallions on to begin belabouring each other with their sticks when they thought that the other had ill-treated his animal.

A typical horsefight is well described in Gretti's

Saga:

In the summer a large horse-fight (hestathing) was appointed at Langafit above Reykjar, and thither came many men. Atli of Bjarg (Gretti's brother) had a good horse, with a dark stripe along its back, and of Keingala's breed (a famous mare which had been owned by Gretti's father). Father and son thought a great deal of the horse. The brothers Kormak and Thorgils of Mel had a brown horse, fearless in fight. The horse of the brothers and that of Atli from Bjarg were to fight against each other. There were also many other good horses. Odd Umagaskald, a kinsman of Kormak, was to attend the horse of the brothers during that day; he had become a strong man, was very proud, overbearing, and reckless. Gretti asked his brother Atli who should attend to his horse. "I have not quite decided that," Atli said. "Do you wish me to stand near it?" Gretti asked. "Be very quiet, then kinsman," Atli added, "for we have to deal with proud men." "They will have to pay

for their overbearing," continued Gretti, "if they do not keep it within bounds." These horses were now led forward, while the others were standing tied together near the bank of the river, which was there deep.

The horses bit each other savagely, and afforded the greatest amusement. Odd followed his horse eagerly, while Gretti retreated and siezed the horse's tail with one hand, holding in the other a staff, with which he whipped him. The horses while fighting moved towards the river; Odd thrust at Gretti with the staff, and hit his shoulder-blade, which was turned towards him. The blow was so violent that the flesh was bruised, but Gretti was only slightly wounded. At that moment the horses rose high on their hind legs. Gretti jumped under the haunch of his horse and thrust his staff into the side of Odd, with such force that three of his ribs were broken, and he fell into the river with his horse as well as all the others. Men swam out to him, and he was pulled up from the river. At this there was much shouting. Kormak and his men and those from Bjarg siezed their weapons; when the men from Hrutafjord and those from Vatnsnes saw this, they interceded, and they were parted, and went home threatening each other; but they nevertheless kept quiet for awhile. Atli spoke little of it, but Gretti was rather loud-spoken, and said they would meet again, if he had his way.¹⁴

There were laws concerning horse-fighting and sometimes umpires were chosen. Thus we read:

Wherever a man makes the horse of another fight without the owner's permission he shall pay the loss that ensues and "ofundarbot" (indemnity paid for intentional outrage) to the owner, according to lawful judgment. If the hurt is valued at half a mark, he shall pay full rett according to law, as if it were done from hatred or envy. Every man shall answer for himself at a horse-fight, whoever may have the fight. If a man strikes a horse without necessity at a horse-fight, he shall pay ofundarbot to the owner; and if the horse is damaged by it, he shall pay indemnity for damages and rett-of-envy to the owner.¹⁵

Icelandic horse-fights seem to have been held

¹⁴P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 358.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 361.

regularly at particular places and times; for instance after a legal Assembly. Sometimes other games also took place at the same meeting; on one occasion it is stated that the competition had been chosen to represent neighbouring districts. In Norway in later times district rivalry was acute; there the horse-fights were followed by wild bare-back races, the riders lashing one another as well as their mounts, and often making their horses leap onto a rock as a grand finale. Icelanders, on the contrary, do not seem to have raced much; references to betting on the outcome of horse-races are very rare.

Wagons and Chariots

The Oseberg wagon is the only complete wheeled vehicle preserved from the Viking Age. The road system being inadequate during this period, it is not surprising to find that the wagon's under-carriage was generously provided with handles to carry it whenever it got stuck. The body of the wagon has a curious tub-like cross-section, and the sides are riveted together with an almost exaggerated care. The explanation is that this part was really a waterproof container intended to be lifted bodily into the middle of a boat into which it would have fitted exactly. The only means of holding the container in place on the bumpy roads were ropes fastened round the hook-like beards of the carved heads on the supports that carry the body.¹⁶

¹⁶B. Almgren, op. cit., p. 237.



Fig. 10. Rock carvings from the burial chamber at Kivik, Sweden, showing a horse-drawn chariot.



Fig. 11. The wagon from Deibjerg, Jutland.



Fig. 12. The wagon from the Oseberg Ship.

Remains of other wagons have been found and have been reconstructed as accurately as possible. One of two wagons discovered in the Deibjerg bog in Denmark, for example, is ornamented all over with bronze and has representations of two Viking heads on either side.

Although the Oseberg and Deibjerg wagons must from the lavishness of their carvings and decoration been ceremonial carriages, there is no reason to doubt that there were also wagons and carts for practical use. One section of the Oseberg Tapestry shows what appear to be horse-drawn baggage-wagons, their piled up contents covered by cloths--or possibly the whole thing is meant to be tented over like an American prairie-wagon. Two are led by men walking beside them, the other driven by one of two figures riding in it; all are accompanied by spearmen and other figures on foot. The scene is very likely part of some myth or legend, yet similar convoys may well have been a familiar sight on the roads of Scandinavia.¹⁷

Rock carvings dating back to the Bronze Age and depicting two-wheeled chariots have been found in many parts of Scandinavia. A good example is the engraving of a chariot of Mycenaean-type on a slab of rock in the Kivik burial chamber in South Sweden.¹⁸

¹⁷J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁸J. G. D. Clark, Prehistoric Europe: The Economic Basis (Stanford University Press, 1952), p. 306.

Chapter IV

SWIMMING AND BATHING

Swimming

Being a maritime people it was most important that Viking warriors were able to swim well. The Sagas tell us of Vikings who could swim for miles carrying their weapons or with a companion on their shoulders. Swimming distances on the surface of the water was called "langsund," and being able to swim well underwater and remain a long time underneath, was called "kafsund."¹ Speed was, it seems, less prized than endurance in the water, such as the ability to drag one's opponent down and hold him under water until he collapsed, without oneself needing to come up for air. A good example of this is found in Sigurd Jorsalafar's Saga:

One day in fine weather and warm sunshine many men were swimming, both from the long-ship and the trading ship. An Iclander who was swimming amused himself by taking under water the men who did not swim so well as himself. They laughed at it. King Sigurd heard it and saw; then he threw off his clothes and jumped out, swam to the Iclander, took hold of him, and put him under water, and kept him there, and as soon as the Iclander came up again the king put him down again. Then Sigurd Siggurdsson said: "Shall we let the king drown the man?" A man said that no-one seemed very willing to go to them. Then he answered: "If Dag Eilifson were here, he would be the man to do it." Then he jumped overboard and swam to the king, took hold of him and said: "Do not kill the man lord; all now see that thou swimmest far better." The king said: "Let me alone Sigurd, I shall kill him; he wants to drown our men." Sigurd said: "Now let us play first; and thou Iclander, swim to the land.: He did so. The king let Sigurd loose

¹R. Keyser, The Private Life of the Old Norsemen (London: Chapman and Hall, 1868), p. 152.

and swam to his ship; Sigurd did the same.²

But the Vikings did also indulge in swimming contests. Evidence of this comes from the Flateyjarbok Saga:

The King bade Nikulas Thorbergsson to tire out Heming in swimming. Nikulas was doubtful of success, but consented to try. The King told them both to swim. Heming said: "Now I need not spare myself, as I should have liked best to contend with him if I did with anybody." They undressed and began swimming. Nikulas asked if they should try a long swimming match. "We may try that as thou has had the better of it in the other" (modes of swimming). When they had been swimming for a long time, Nikulas seemed anxious to go back, but Heming said: "I guess you the King's bellies will stop further from the shore." Heming kept on. Nikulas swam somewhat slower, and asked shortly afterwards: "Art thou going to swim longer?" Heming said: "I thought thou wouldst be able to swim alone ashore, and I will swim farther." "That is good, I will risk going back" said Nikulas and turned, but had not gone far before he became faint. At last Heming swam to him and asked how it went with him. He told him it did not concern him, and he might go his way. Heming answered: "I think thou deservest that I do so, but we will nevertheless now go both together." "I will not refuse that" said Nikulas. "Lay thy hand on my back, and thus support thyself;" and in this way they came to land.³

This, of course, might be regarded as a good example of life-saving in the water.

Some of the Sagas make mention of artificial webbing that swimmers attached to their fingers in order to swim better. Thus we find the following example in Gretti's Saga:

Now Grettir got ready to swim, and had on a hooded

²Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), volume III, p. 299.

³P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 386.

cloak, of common cloth, and breeches; he had his fingers webbed together. It was fine weather. He left the island late in the day. Illugi, his brother, thought his journey very dangerous. Grettir swam into the fjord, the current being with him, during a perfect calm. He swam fast and reached Reykjanes after sunset.⁴

Bathing and Bath-houses

In summertime all people bathed, for the sake of pleasure as well as cleanliness, in the natural sheets of water and in running streams; and they also made use of bath-houses found upon almost every farm. But perhaps these bath-houses were more generally used in winter, when a hot bath would be more appreciated.⁵ In Iceland, the bath-houses were often supplied, by means of pipes or conducts, with hot water from the boiling springs, as well as with cold. In continental Scandinavia, where hot springs were lacking, the water was usually heated in kettles for bathing purposes. Wooden vats were usually used for bath-tubs, although in Iceland bath-houses were often built over artificial pools in the rock. In connection with bathing as well as with the daily ablutions, the Vikings doubtless made use of soap.⁶

People who wear fur or skins of any sort, instead of

⁴Ibid., p. 381.

⁵E. Olassen and B. Povelsen, Reise durch Island (Copenhagen, 1774), volume I, p. 58.

⁶E. Henderson, Iceland (Edinburgh, 1818), volume II, p. 142.

linen or similar texture, are apt to suffer from vermin to an almost incredible degree. But even when the Northmen took to linen this could not entirely protect them from the pests, and hence an apparent passion for bathing developed. In Iceland the warm springs were used eagerly for this purpose, and such natural baths were everywhere coveted property and caused many a sharp struggle for possession.⁷

It is likely, however, that the Northmen took sweat or steam baths in the bath-houses rather than the common tub variety of modern times. The steam was produced by sprinkling water upon a stone hearth or upon a mass of stones heated for this purpose. High up, around the walls, ran a wide shelf to which the bathers climbed for the sake of the hotter air and the denser steam; and as they lay upon this, in order to make their flesh glow and to stimulate perspiration, they switched themselves and one another with bunches of fine twigs.⁸

These natural facilities for hot bathing found in Iceland early led to the establishment of public or community bath-houses in the country districts. It happens that several of these as well as some for private use have survived down to modern times, and have been carefully described

⁷F. B. Gummere, Germanic Origins (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), p. 77.

⁸H. Shetelig and H. Falk, Scandinavian Archaeology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 325.

by travellers, such as Olassen and Povelsen in the eighteenth century. The buildings were roughly circular or rectangular, with low walls, generally constructed from pieces of lava. One of them was large enough to hold thirty persons at a time, another fifty. Some of the bath-houses were placed over crevices in the ground from which issued dense currents of steam, while others spanned streams of boiling water. Such were used merely as vapor baths. In other cases the building was at a little distance from the geyser, hot stream or hot lake, and the water was conducted to where it was needed by means of a stone aqueduct. The containers for the water varied; some were square or circular basins hewn out of solid rock, others merely much depressed parts of the floor of the room reached by means of a flight of stone steps. The shelf or bench upon which the bathers reclined in these Icelandic baths was usually of stone, built up solidly from the floor. The steam bath was often followed by a cold douche or a roll in the snow, a practice still common in Scandinavia today.⁹

This system of bathing was perhaps fairly general in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, for it was practiced as far south as Switzerland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In Scandinavia and, in fact, the whole of Northern Europe, these steam baths have survived, the modern

⁹M. W. Williams, Social Scandinavia in the Viking Age (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 138.

version being the Sauna.

In ancient Scandinavia the men generally used the bath-house at a different time from women. However, whole families often bathed together, without distinction of sex. The most common time for taking a bath appears to have been in the evening after supper, just before retiring. Some days were specifically designated as bath-days. In the Story of Hakon Shoulder-Broad mention is made of such a bath-day:

He stayed there for a night, and went to matins there on the last day of Yule, and the gospel was read to him thereafter; this was on a bath-day.¹⁰

Another cleansing process which took place late in the evening was known as "baking." The members of the household, particularly the older ones, lay before the large open fires in the living-room, letting the heat play upon parts of their bare bodies, while the children or servants rubbed them. This was obviously a perspiration bath, and was also taken more often in winter than in summer. But that it was thought of definitely as a method of cleansing the body is shown by the fact that the steam and water baths in the bath-houses were also in the early time called "baking." This baking by the fire was probably the oldest form of cleansing one's body by means of heat in the Scandinavian North.

¹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume III, p. 420.

Regular water baths in the places originally erected for steam-bathing probably did not come into use until near the close of the Viking period; and it was also toward the decline of this age that many of the large hot-springs of Iceland were converted into public or community baths, and that in the rising towns of Denmark, Norway and Sweden public bath-houses began to be established.¹¹

¹¹M. W. Williams, op. cit., p. 86.

Chapter V

WINTER TRAVEL AND SPORTS

In Northern Europe, as it is subjected to long cold winters, it is not surprising to find ample evidence of skating, skiing, snowshoeing and sledges among the Vikings. Winter was in some ways the best time for travelling, for rivers and swamps were frozen solid and hill slopes were smooth with snow. Skis and snowshoes were commonly used; there were also bone skates cut to fit the foot, which one used by thrusting oneself over the ice with a spiked stick, hardly lifting one's feet. Ice crampons were fitted to men's shoes. Goods and people could be transported by sledges which were pulled along by humans as well as horses.

As man is a playful and competitive creature, it is not difficult to imagine physical contests, games and sports developing on skates, skis, snowshoes and sledges.

Skating

The earliest references to skating are to be found in the Scandinavian and Icelandic Sagas: In the Saga of Sigurd Jerusalem-farer:

King Eystein answered: "I swam not shorter than thou, nor was I a worse diving-swimmer. I also knew how to fare on ice-bones, so that no-one did I know who could champion me therein, but thou knewest it no more than a neat."

King Sigurd answered: "A more lordly sport and a more useful I deem it, to ken well the bow. I am minded to think that thou canst not draw my bow, though thou spurn thy foot therein."

Answered King Eystein: "As bow-strong as thou I am not; but less sundereth our straight shooting. And much

better can I snow-shoe than thou, and that has been called, time ago at least, a good sport.¹

The earliest skates² were made from long bones--most commonly the metacarpals of horse and ox--smoothed on the under-surface and cut away on the upper. They varied in length from eleven to twelve inches. In some skates the articulating joints at one end have been crudely cut off and made to taper away sharply to a point forming the "prow" of the skate, through which a hole has been drilled. The other end was roughly trimmed square and a hole drilled at the back running right through the bone stem. Through these holes were slipped leather thongs to attach the skate to the foot. Sometimes they were merely perforated at either end to secure thongs for the feet.

The up-turned end of the foot-rest must have given some purchase to a skilled user, and it should be remembered that, to judge from Olaus Magnus' illustration³, iron-tipped rods were used to speed the skater along over the ice. It has been claimed that bone skates were used as early as the late Stone Age, but Robert Munro's rejection of these

¹Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), volume III, p. 280.

²R. Munro, "Notes on Ancient Bone Skates," P.S.A.S., 1894, XXVIII, p. 185.

³G. Jones, A History of the Vikings (Longon: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 27.

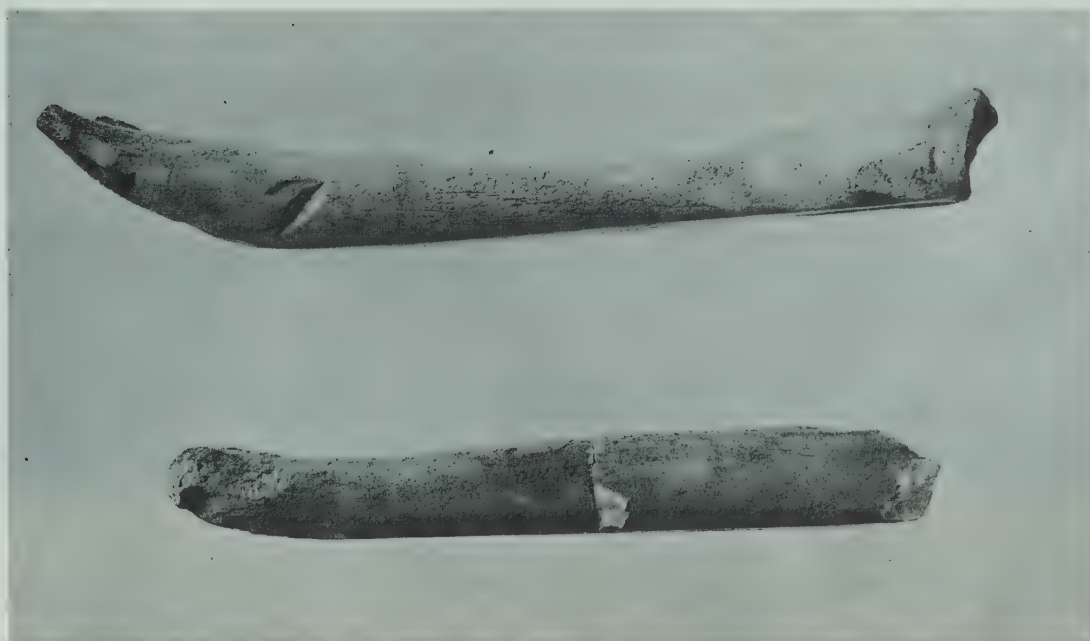
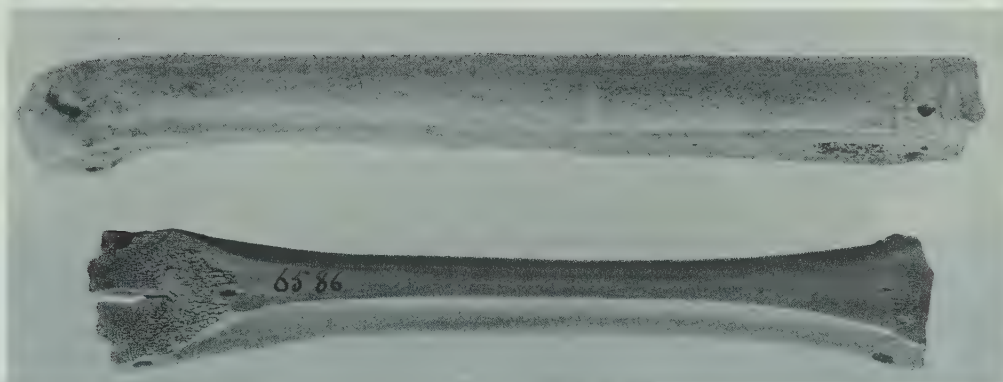


Fig. 13. Shin-bones used for ice skates by the Vikings.

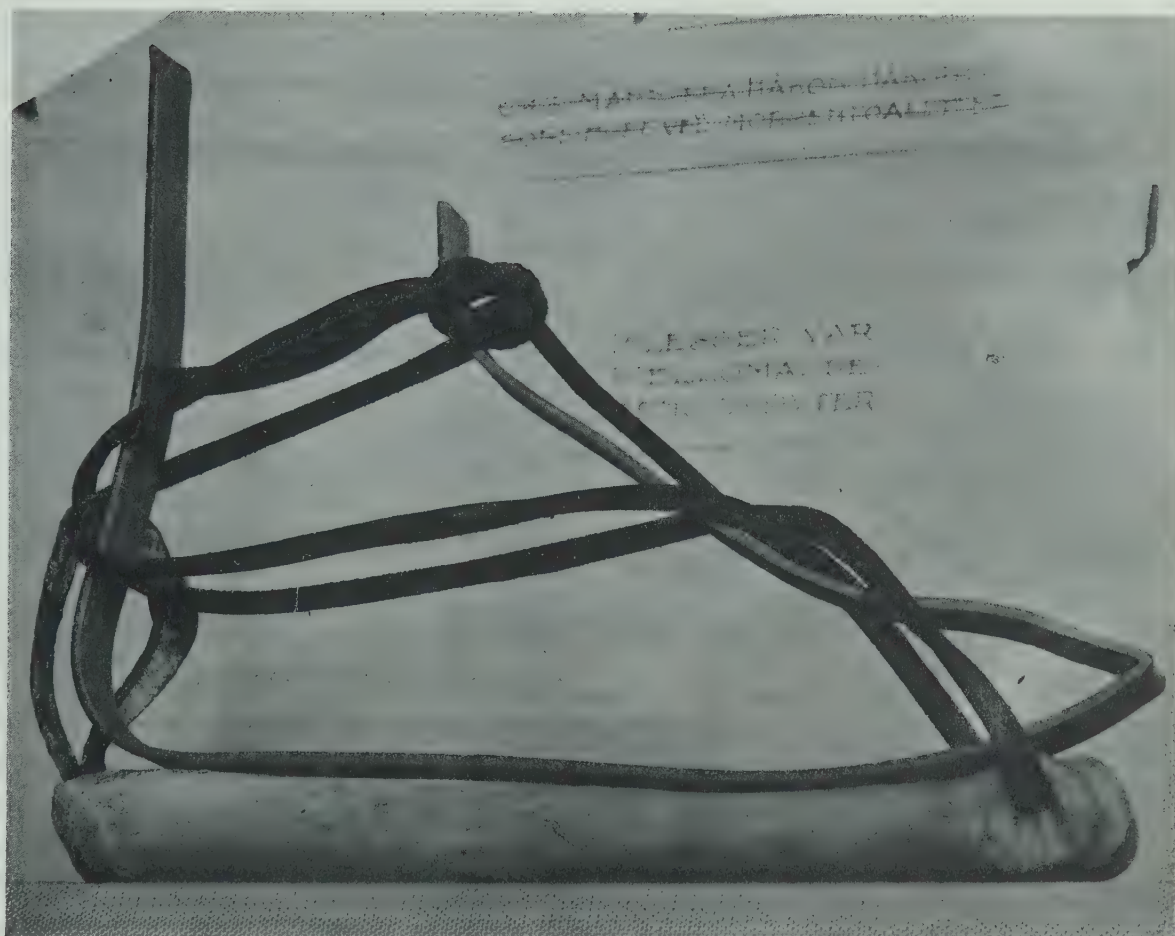


Fig. 14. Reconstructed bone skate.

theories has been confirmed by the results of scientific excavation. The exploration of sites like Birka has shown that they had come into use by the Viking period, and it would seem that during Medieval times they spread over a wide extent of Northern Europe, in the folk culture of which they survived down to the present.⁴

Birka was mainly a merchant's town, with markets both winter and summer. Graves in which the dead were buried with ice-crampons on their feet, and the large number of skates found, show that the freezing of the lakes was not allowed to interrupt business. Winter, is, after all, the best time for a fur market as the winter furs are the best. Furs were among the main wares the merchants of Birka had to trade with their visitors for the silver and silk from the Orient, and the salt, clothes and household luxuries of Western Europe.⁵

In Bishop Percy's translation of runic poetry there is the passage where a northern hero, wishing to show his proficiency in many exercises, claims:

I know how to perform eight exercises - I fight with courage; I keep a firm seat on horseback; I am skilled in swimming; I glide along the ice on skates; I excel in darting the lance; I am dexterous at the oar; and yet a

⁴J. G. D. Clarke, Prehistoric Europe: The Economic Basis (Stanford University Press, 1952), p. 301.

⁵A. Holger, The Vikings (London: Thames and Houston, 1961), p. 41.

Russian maid disdains me.⁶

While allowing for liberal translation and the difficulty in interpreting clearly the difference between skiing and skating over snow and ice, because of the lack of definite data about the actual means used for this purpose, there is nevertheless no doubt that skating as a means of locomotion was considered a most notable accomplishment in the North.

Skiing

Evidence regarding the skiing activities of the Vikings comes once again from the Sagas, from rock engravings and from skis discarded in bogs and preserved owing to the dampness of the deposits in which they were found. The degrees to which they have survived varied no doubt according to local conditions, and it must be remembered that most were probably damaged before being discarded.

Earl Rognvald of the Orkneys (1135-1158) could boast of nine assorted talents, all traditional ones:

I am master of nine accomplishments - I play well at chess; I know how to engrave runic letters; I am apt at my book, and know how to handle the tools of the smith; I traverse the snow on skates of wood; I excel in shooting with the bow and in managing the oar; I sing to the harp and compose verses.⁷

⁶N. Brown, Ice-Skating - a History (London: Nicholas Kaye, 1959), p. 15.

⁷J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 162.

Skiing was popular throughout Northern Europe, not only for pleasure but also for travelling from one place to another, on hunting trips and even in warfare. The historian Olaus Magnus, for example, left us drawings of Lapps hunting on skis.⁸ Of the Finns we read in Saxo Grammaticus:

Now, the Finns are the uttermost peoples of the North, who have taken a portion of the world that is barely habitable to till and dwell in. They are very keen spearmen, and no nation has a readier skill in throwing the javelin. They fight with large, broad arrows; they are addicted to the study of spells; they are skilled hunters. Their habitation is not fixed, and their dwellings are migratory; they pitch and settle wherever they have caught game. Riding on curved boards, they run over ridges thick with snow.⁹

According to Saxo the Finns also successfully utilised skis during warfare:

For the Finns, who are wont to glide on slippery timbers, scud along at whatever pace they will, and are considered to be able to approach or depart very quickly; for as soon as they have damaged the enemy they fly away as speedily as they approach, nor is the retreat they make quicker than their charge. Thus their vehicles and their bodies are so nimble that they acquire the utmost expertness both in advance and flight.¹⁰

The skis recovered from the northern bogs belong to several different types and these can be distinguished most easily in the first instance by noting the manner of secur-

⁸G. Jones, op. cit., p. 27.

⁹Saxo Grammaticus, The First Nine Books of the Danish History, translated by Oliver Elton (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967), p. 203.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 373.

ing the skier's foot. The chief division is between the more primitive types, and those with a raised foot-rest laterally perforated for the straps. The Swedish investigator Wilklund distinguished two main classes of primitive skis, the "Southern" ski in which the foot rests in a hollow between two raised side-pieces, and the "Arctic" or "Northern" ski to which the foot was secured by loops passed through the thickness of the runner itself.¹¹

The Arctic ski, short and broad and generally tapered in front and squared behind, has been used in modern times over a vast territory from Finnmark in Northern Norway right across Northern Eurasia to the Behring Strait among such folk as Lapps, Ostiaks, Woguls and even the Ainu of Japan. They were certainly used by some Viking groups in the North, as evidenced by grave and bog finds. It is primarily a hunting ski, and to make it slide as noiselessly as possible, the under surface was often covered by hairy skin, a reminder, as the Norwegian Nils Lid has pointed out, of a possible origin in the fur shoe. Proof that skis of this type were already in use during the Stone Age of Northern Europe is given by the discovery of a pair, one of them fragmentary, and an accompanying stick at Kalvtrask in Vasterbotten, Northern Sweden, which can be referred to this

¹¹K. B. Wilklund, Den Nordiska skiden den sodra och den arktiska (Stockholm, 1931).

period on the evidence of pollen analysis.¹² The main function of the stick was to help steer, but to judge from Lapp analogies the spatulate end was designed for such purposes as scooping melted snow from a rill for drinking or removing frozen lumps from travelling gear. Additional evidence for the early use of skis, almost certainly of this (Arctic) type is provided by the rock engravings. At Zalavrouga on the river Vyg which flows into the White Sea, phallu figures are depicted on mounted skis and grasping sticks. Again, Gjessing was almost certainly right in interpreting some engravings at Rodoy on the coast of North-West Norway as skiers.¹³

Whereas the Arctic ski is adapted for use where hardened snow lies on the ground, the Southern type is particularly suitable for loose heavy snow, such as is commonly experienced in regions with a shorter period of snow-cover. It remained in use, or was in comparatively recent use, over a broad belt of Russia from a line between the Upper Pechora River and the Gulf of Finland in the North to the middle Volga and Dnieper in the South; in the East Baltic countries, especially Latvia and Esthonia; in South Sweden as far North as the boundary between Gota-and Svealand; and in the warm coastal track of North-West Norway.

¹²J. G. D. Clarke, op. cit., p. 298.

¹³G. Gjessing, Circumpolar Stone Age (Copenhagen, 1944), p. 5.

The survival of this primitive type in South Sweden is no doubt due to the subsidiary role played by skis in this area. They were used mainly for crossing from one building to another and served rather like highly specialized clogs; in origin, indeed, it is held by Nils Lid that they actually bear the same relation to wooden shoes as the Northern fur-covered ski-type does to fur shoes.¹⁴ The southern ski can likewise be traced back to the Late Stone Age, though so far examples from early deposits have only been recovered from Finland. The classic find is the damaged ski from Ruhimaki in Southern Finland, dated by pollen-analysis to a slightly later period than the Kalotrask find, though still within the Stone Age of the region.

The first skis with built-up foot-rests were those with flat sliding surfaces characteristic of the northernmost provinces of Finland and Sweden. The oldest specimen, a specimen from Hoting in Angermanland, has been referred to a period equivalent to that of the passage graves of Southern Scandinavia; and two at least from each have been dated to the period of the Bronze Age.¹⁵

The two main types of skis, with built-up foot-rests, that have been identified are the Bothnu-type and the Scandu

¹⁴N. Lid, On the History of Norwegian Skis (Oslo, 1937), p. 8.

¹⁵G. Berg and G. Lundqvist, Finds of Skis from Pre-historic Time in Swedish Bogs and Marshes (Stockholm, 1941), no. 25.

type.

The Bothnu type proper, as defined by Berg, with a slightly concave foot-rest and a definitely convex sliding surface, does not appear on present evidence to have come into use until early in the present era. Finds from the first part of the first millenium A.D. include a damaged pair of skis from Arvtrask in Lappland and a fragment from Bodan in Vasterbotten. This type of ski was, in all probability, used by the Vikings in the most northerly provinces of Finland and Sweden.

The Scandu type was found further south. The foot-rests and lists on either edge of the under-surface of the runner were designed probably to make it easier to stem on slopes and to assist in steering. To judge from the pollen-dating of fragments from Amas in Darlama and from Sorviken in Jamtland, this type of ski had already come into use by the time of the Bronze Age in South Scandinavia.¹⁶ A damaged ski dating from the last centuries before Christ has the grooves characteristic of the Scandu, with the foot attachments typical of the Southern type of ski, and may indicate contact between users of the two kinds. It has sometimes been argued, and Nils Lid regards it as evident, that the Scandu-type gave rise, through a reduction in the width of the runner and a coalescing of the edge grooves, to the ski with strong steering groove in the middle of the

¹⁶Ibid., nos. 9 and 19.

under-surface.¹⁷ The chronological evidence is certainly consistent with this view, since grooved skis as a group come latest in the series; indeed, with the exception of the front part of a runner from Ovrebo in South-West Norway, referred to the Late Bronze Age on the evidence of pollen analysis, no examples seem to have survived from before the early Middle Ages.

This, then, is a brief description of the different types and origins of skis that must have been used by the Vikings in their work, play and daily living during the winter months.

Snow Shoeing

But although there is ample evidence that skiing and skis were used by the Vikings as a mode of overland travel in winter, it does seem, judging especially from literary evidence, that snow-shoes were probably a more popular and practical means of winter travel. The possibility must not be ruled out, of course, that when mention is made of snow-shoes in the Sagas the writer might quite easily be referring in fact to skis.

Once again, the main evidence for snow-shoeing comes from archaeological discoveries and from the Sagas. As mentioned before, it is possible in some of the Sagas that the author is referring to skis when he talks of snow-shoes.

¹⁷N. Lid, op. cit., p. 15.

But in many cases we are able to determine whether the writer is referring to snow-shoes or skis by the description of the activity and the foot gear. For example, if the Saga is referring to skiing the action will be described as "gliding" or "sliding" over the snow. But if snow-shoeing is being described the action will be one of "walking" or "running" over the snow. In the Saga of Olaf the Holy:

Then Thorir gave snow-shoes to either of them, and Arnliot betook himself to faring with them, and strode on the snow-shoes, which were both broad and long. But so soon as Arnliot plied his staff he was off and afar from them. Then abided he, and said that in this way they would get no-whither, and bade them step on the snow-shoes along with him; and so did they; and Thorod stood next to Arnliot and held by his belt, while Thorod's fellow held on to him. Then Arnliot slid on as fast as if he were faring loose.¹⁸

This could be a description of skiing as the snow-shoes are described as being "broad and long." The phrase "plied his staff" can be implied to mean he pushed himself along with a pole or rod. A more valid description of snow-shoeing is found in the Flateyjarbok Saga:

The king asked: "Art thou a man of Idrottir?" Heming answered: "My foster-father and foster-mother thought that I knew many things well, but I have not shown my skill to others, and I think you will find it slight. One idrott I think I can perform for you." "Which?" asked the king. "I do not care with whom I try running on snow-shoes, for nobody can surpass me in that."

Later in the same Saga we read:

They landed at a large mountain, very steep towards the sea, and there was a path along the mountain-side on

¹⁸Snorri Sturlusson, op. cit., volume II, p. 299.

which only one man at a time could walk. There were precipices beneath and a high mountain above, and the ledges on the mountain-side were only wide enough for one man on horseback. The King ordered him (Heming) to assume them by running on snow-shoes. Heming said: "It is now not suitable to run on snow-shoes, for there is no snow, but only ice, and the mountain is very hard." The King replied: "There would be no danger if all was in the best condition." "As you will," said Heming, and took his snow-shoes and ran about the mountain-side, up and down, and all said they had never seen anyone run so nimbly.¹⁹

Snow-shoes must have been indispensable to the hunter in winter. In Olaf the Holy:

The King looked up at him and greeted him, and asked -- him of tidings. Emund answered: "Small are the tidings among us Gautlanders; but news we deem it, that Atti the Fool of Vermland went up last winter into the Mark with his snow-shoes and bow; in our esteem he is the greatest of hunters. He had gotten on the mountain so many furs, that he had filled his sleigh with as much as he could bring after him. Then he turned homeward from the Mark, but in the wood he saw a squirrel, and shot at it, and missed it; then was he wroth and let loose the sleigh, and ran after the squirrel.²⁰

Sledges

The idea of constructing a sledge to facilitate the transport of humans and goods over the snow was conceived thousands of years before the Viking Age. Thus it is not surprising to find that the Northmen of the Viking Age also travelled in sledges and sleighs. The sledges in the far North, especially on the borders of regions occupied chiefly

¹⁹P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 386.

²⁰Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 156.

by Lapps and Finns, were made partially of rawhide drawn over wooden frames and fitted with runners of hard timber. But further south in Scandinavia sledges were made almost entirely of wood, often richly covered. A number of sledges have been found in Viking graves. One of the best examples comes from the Oseberg Ship. This elaborately carved sledge had its lower portion carved with animal ornament in the late Vendel style, while above this is inlaid a strongly geometrical moulding of true classical form.²¹

In some graves only the heavy hooks by which the sledges were hitched up have been preserved. Some sledges were pulled along by humans, others by one horse and some by two horses. The shoes of the horses were fitted with cramp-ons. There is no evidence that the Vikings used dogs to pull their sledges.

Most sledges had the bodywork only loosely attached to the runners; at Oseberg some were inter-changeable, while another did not fit the runners it was found with. It has been suggested that some of the bodies could be fitted to a wheeled frame for summer and to runners for winter, and perhaps even be lifted into boats if the journey were partly by water.²²

Sledges and sleighs were obviously indispensable on

²¹F. Shetelig and H. Falk, Scandinavian Archaeology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 297.

²²J. Simpson, op. cit., p. 115.



Fig. 15. Ski-sledge found at Finnskoga.

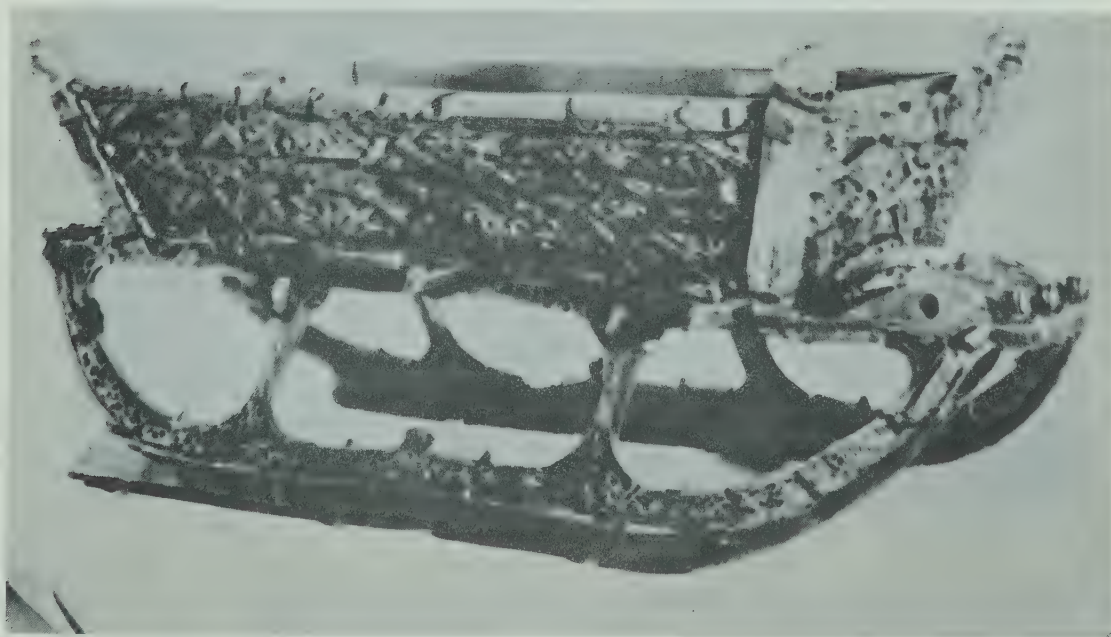


Fig. 16. Sledge from the Oseberg find.



Fig. 17. Rock carving showing Norseman hunting on skis.

hunting trips in winter, as has been suggested in Olaf the Holy, previously quoted. But sledges must also have been very necessary for trading during the winter months. In the Saga of Olaf the Holy:

But when day dawned, they stood up and first ate their day-meal; and when they had eaten Arnliot said: "Now shall we part here; ye shall follow this sledge-road whereby the merchants fared hither yesterday; but I will seek my spear. For my wages I shall take what I deem of money's worth among the chattels which these men owned.²³

In the same Saga is found evidence of a horse-drawn sledge:

And the horse he took and bade the swain jump aback of it, and Stein set himself in the sleigh, and so they went their way and drove through the whole night; and they went their ways till they came down into Sorreldale in Mere. Then they got themselves ferried across the firths, and at their very swiftest they sped on.²⁴

Runners of man-drawn sledges used by the Vikings and earlier inhabitants of Scandinavia, have been discovered at Morjaro in Sweden. These sledges were built-up and light, and intended to be hauled by a line attached to a harness over the left shoulder of a man wearing snow-shoes.²⁵

²³Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 301

²⁴Ibid., p. 279.

²⁵J. G. D. Clarke, op. cit., p. 296.

Chapter VI

ATHLETIC EXERCISES

It is a characteristic of man, in ancient as well as modern times, to be intensely interested in his own physical strength, and the Vikings were no exception. It has been suggested in the first five chapters that the Vikings were competitive by nature in many spheres of life. This is further illustrated in their athletic contests against each other. The Sagas seem to indicate that the Norsemen were often so presumptuous when it came to physical contests that they were prepared to sacrifice life and limb to prove their physical superiority.

Running

The exercise of running was called "skeid" and swiftness of foot was held in great esteem amongst men. Sometimes, when running over hilly terrain, the runner held a pole in each hand with which to assist himself up the steeper slopes.¹ Some men were said to be able to run as fast as horses. It was often customary to run with loads, as well as weapons. In the Story of Olaf the Holy is written:

There was a man called Finn the Little of Upland blood, but some would have it, a Finn of kindred; he was of all the men the smallest and the swiftest of foot; so that no horse might overtake him running. Of all men

¹R. Keyser, Private Life of the Old Northmen (London: 1868), p. 152.

was he best skilled on snow-shoes and at the bow.²

The following events are related in Njala's Saga:

Skarphedin (son of Njal, a great champion) started up when he was ready, holding the axe Rimmugyg in the air; he ran forward to the channel of the river, which was so deep that it was completely impassible. Much ice had been forced up on the other side of the river, and it was as slippery as glass; they (Thrain and his men) stood in the middle of it. Skarphedin swung himself aloft and leapt over the river between the sheets of ice, and did not stop, but ran sliding on the ice. This was very slippery, and he advanced as swiftly as a flying bird. Thrain was going to put on his helmet. Skarphedin came up to them and aimed at Thrain with his axe, struck his head, and cleft it down to the jaw, so that they fell down on the ice. This happened so suddenly that nobody could deal him a blow. He ran away instantly with great speed.³

This obviously is not evidence for running as a sport, but rather evidence that the ability to run faster than other men was a noteworthy physical skill. The ability to run fast is complimented and alluded to time and again in the Sagas, and it must be assumed that the Norsemen must have run competitively against each other, even if not in regular athletic meetings.

In the Story of Sigurd Jorsalafara we read the interesting story of a race between a man and a horse:

It was usual that Harald should attend the king to his sleeping-room in the evenings, but once it so chanced that those about Magnus got him to stay behind,

²Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1894), volume III, p. 126.

³P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 371.

and they sat long and drank. Harald was talking with another man; and speaking of Ireland, he said that there were men in Ireland so fleet of foot that no horse could outstrip them in a race.

Magnus, the king's son heard this, and said: "Now he again lies, as is his wont."

Harald answered: "It is truth that men can be found in Ireland whom no horse in Norway can gallop past." About this they had some words; both had drank deeply.

Just prior to this Magnus had received from Gotland a horse which was a perfect treasure and very fast. About this they who were present spoke, saying that there was no horse so fast; and they turned towards Harald. Then said Magnus: "Here shalt thou wager thine head, that thou canst run as fast as I can ride my horse; and I will lay against it my gold ring."

Said Harald: "I did not say that I would run so fast, but that I could find men out in Ireland who could run so fast; and on that I will wager."

Magnus answered: "I shall not go to Ireland; we two must wager here, not there."

Harald then went away to bed and would have no more to do with him. This happened at Oslo.

But next morning when matins were ended, Magnus, riding his fast Gotland horse, went up to the road, and sent word to Harald to come thither. When Harald came he was thus dressed: he wore a shirt and breeches with footsole bands, a short mantle, an Irish cap on his head, and a spear-shaft in his hand. Magnus was marking the course. Harald said: "Thou art making it too long." Magnus at once made it much longer, and said, it was even so too short. Many men were present.

Then they raced over the course forwards, and Harald kept ever level with the horse's shoulders: but when they came to the end, Magnus said; "Thou heldest on by the girth-strap, and the horse drew thee." They had another race back; and now Harald ran all the course just before the horse; and when they came to the end Harald asked: "Did I then hold by the girth-strap?"

Magnus answered: "Thou heldest by the bridle." Then Magnus let his horse breathe awhile; but when he was ready, he set spurs to the horse, who quickly got into his gallop. Harald stood still. Then Magnus looked back, and called out "Run now." Then Harald bounded off, and soon passed the horse and went far ahead, and kept so to the end of the course. He came in so far in front that he lay down, and then sprang up and greeted his kinsman Magnus when he came there. After that they went home to the house.

But King Sigurd had been at high mass the while, and knew nought of this till after the mid-day meal. Then he said angrily to Magnus: "Thou callest Harald home-

bred and silly. Methinks thou art the greater fool: thou art ignorant of men's manners in foreign lands: thou knowest not that men of foreign lands train themselves to other sports rather than to guzzle ale and make themselves mad and helpless and lost to all sense of what befits a man. Give thou to Harald the ring he hath won: and never henceforth jeer at him, while my head is above ground and I am master."⁴

This quote once again illustrates very well the competitive and arrogant characteristics of the Northmen, and also the emphasis placed on speed of foot. It is interesting to note the clothes and footwear Harald wore for the race. It might well be that he wore breeches designed in such a way so as not to impede his movements, while the footsole bands could possibly be interpreted as being worn to give better traction. If this is the case then Harald must surely have competed often in running races else he would not have carried these clothes and footwear around with him.

Jumping

Jumping feats are often alluded to in Old Norse literature under the title hlaup. The Sagas make mention of Viking warriors who could jump higher than their own height, sometimes carrying with them their weapons and armour. Agility was absolutely necessary in order to obtain victory or to escape from danger; many a man owed his life either to a timely jump to one side, or to a leap from a height, or

⁴W. C. Green, (ed.), Translations From the Icelandic (New York: Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1966), p. 104

over a circle of surrounding foes. Hence they used to practice leaping in heavy armour, leaping down from elevated positions, so as to reach the ground standing, and leaping over broad and deep places.

Thus in Herraud and Bosi's Saga:

One day as they (Herraud and Bosi) sailed near the land in a strong gale, a man standing on a rock asked to be allowed to go with them. Herraud said he could not go out of his course for him, but if he could reach the ship he might go with them. The man jumped from the rock, and came down on the tiller; it was a leap of thirty feet.⁵

In Njala's Saga:

Lambi Sigurdson ran at Kari from behind and thrust a spear at him; but Kari saw him and jumped up at the same time spreading his legs. The spear came down into the ground, and Kari stepped on the handle and broke it assunder.⁶

Also, in Njala's Saga:

Skarphedin stood with his axe on his shoulder, smiling scornfully, and said: "This axe I had in my hand when I leapt 12 ells (24 feet) over Markarfljot and slew Thrain Sigfusson, and they stood there eight men, and none of them got hold of me."⁷

In the Faereyinga Saga:

Sigurd ran down on the single path, but Leif came to where Heri, one of Sigurd's companions, lay, and quickly turned, ran forward on the island, and jumped down to the foreshore, and men say it is ninety feet down to the beach.⁸

⁵P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 371.

⁶Ibid., p. 371.

⁷Ibid., p. 371.

⁸Ibid., p. 370.

The twenty-four feet horizontal jump claimed by Skarphedin and the ninety foot vertical jump by Leif are probably exaggerations although not wholly impossible. These jumping feats, however, were probably not recorded to emphasise the actual jumping ability of the jumpers concerned, but rather their physical strength. But should Skarphedin in fact have jumped a twenty-four foot broad-jump it would be of considerable interest to modern track and field enthusiasts, especially as he was carrying an axe in his hand. This axe might, of course, have had the same effect as the jumping weights or halteres used by ancient Greek athletes in assisting forward momentum.

Climbing

The mountainous character of Scandinavia and Iceland offered ample opportunity for men to exercise by means of climbing. Men used to compete against each other in mountain climbing, an exercise termed "brattgengi" (from "bratt" meaning steep, and "geni" meaning to go). A good example of such a competition is found in the Saga of Olaf Tryggvason:

King Olaf once had his ships in a harbour, not far from a very high mountain and most steep rocks. One day two of his men were talking about their idrottir, and each thought himself the better, and that he knew more games than the other. They contended as to who could climb the steepest rock; they disputed about this so keenly that at last they made a bet, and the one wagered his gold ring, and the other his head. After this they both climbed the rock. The first went so far that he was in danger of falling down, and then returned in fear, and could with difficulty save himself from injury; the other climbed up to the middle of the mountain, but there he dared go neither forward nor back-

ward, nor even move, for he had but little hold either for hands or feet; his position was so dangerous, that he saw his downfall and death were certain if he should make the least movement where he was. He shouted in great fear for King Olaf and his men to help him. When the King heard his shout, and found out what it was about, he bade them save him, saying that it would be a deed of great bravery if any one should dare to do it. When the King saw that no one stirred, he threw off his cloak and ran up the rock to the man as if it had been a level plain, took him under his arm, and went farther up with him. He then turned to go down with the man under his arm, and laid him unharmed on the ground. All praised this as a great feat, and the fame thereof was widely spread.⁹

Once again it must be reasonably safe to assume that as long as there have been mountains men will climb or attempt to climb them. But they will not only climb them but will attempt to climb them before and faster than their fellowmen. Thus mountain-climbing becomes a competitive sport, and must always have existed as such even if on a crude and unorganized basis. The challenge, however, does of course not always come from an opposing climber but from the mountain itself. The above quote illustrates not only that mountain-climbing existed as a sport amongst the Vikings but brings to the fore once again the physical and mental superiority of their kings and leaders. A king of the Vikings could not afford to be a physical weakling and had to be reasonably competent in most physical skills in order to retain the confidence of his followers.

Wrestling

⁹Ibid., p. 371.

As can be expected, wrestling was a popular pastime with the Norsemen, and was a great favourite at the Things and festivals. During sessions of the Thing young men would generally hold games and athletic exercises in the presence of their elders, at such times as the business of the court permitted. As these courts were usually held on a plain, it was not difficult to find a convenient place for this purpose. Generally a plain surrounded by rising ground was selected so that spectators of both sexes could enjoy a good view.

Besides this, in certain districts the young men would arrange special gatherings, at convenient places; and if the games lasted over several days, buildings would be erected for their convenience. Occasions like this were looked upon as regular holidays and great numbers of people of either sex would throng to them. Meetings such as this were even conducted for the purpose of conducting ball games as is well illustrated in the Eyrbyggja Saga:

Now it was the wont of the Broadwickers in autumn, about the time of winter-nights, to have ball-play under the shoulder south of Cnear, and the place thereafter was called the Playhall-meads, and men took themselves thither from all the countryside; and great play-halls were made there, wherein men abode and dwelt there a half-month or more. Many chosen men there were as then in the countryside, and it was thickly peopled. Most of the young men were at the plays, except Thord Wall-eye; but he might not deal therein because of his too great eagerness, though he was not so strong that he might not play for that cause. So he sat on a chair and looked on the play. Those brethren withal, Biorn and Arnbiorn, were not deemed meet to play because of their strength, unless they

played one against the other.¹⁰

The most simple form of wrestling was called fang and resembled our modern Greco-Roman wrestling. The wrestlers took hold of each other's arms or waists as best they could, and by the strength of their arms tried to throw each other off their feet.

A more difficult form of wrestling called glima was that of grappling and attacking each other according to certain rules, and by systematic turning and grappling movements, with arms and legs, seeking to bring each other to the ground. Glima is still practiced in Iceland today, the rules seemingly little changed since Viking times. The game requires extreme suppleness, skill and perfect co-ordination. Two contestants, stripped to the waist, wear girdles or belts around the waist and thighs. Each one takes hold of the other's belt with his right hand, just above the hip or slightly further back. At first the left hand of either is left hanging freely or is used to grasp the opponent's right thigh girdle on the outer side. The body is bent forward, and either the right or left shoulder of the two contestants must be close together. They look over each other's shoulder but never down at the feet. Then, the wrestling by touch and feeling begins, the object for the wrestler being to throw his opponent on his back, scoring being done by the

¹⁰W. Morris and E. Magnusson (ed.), The Story of the Ere-Dwellers (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892), p. 112.

number of throws. The loser is the one who first touches the ground with any part of his body above the knee or elbow.¹¹ The wrestling involves quick movements with the feet and hands. The Vikings gave names to certain moves and holds. When a man lifted his opponent bodily up in his arms, swung him around and then threw him onto the ground, it was called sveifla. When he tried to throw his opponent by a turn of the hip it was called lausamjodm. When he twisted his foot round his opponent's leg it was termed haelkrokr (from hael meaning heel, and krokr meaning hook).¹²

The wrestlers often threw off not only their outer clothing, but also their undergarments in order to be more free and agile. The competitors were divided by lots into two groups, each of which was drawn up in a row with a leader. The leader paired off the men in his group and a winner was decided in each group on a basis similar to a modern "knock-out" competition. The final was between the winners from each group.

From Gretti's Saga we get the following accounts of wrestling:

The sons of Thord were the leaders of the games. Thorbjorn Ongul was very overbearing and quickly forced anyone he wanted to take part in the game, siezing him by the hand, and pulling him forward to the field.

¹¹A. E. Jensen, Iceland (New York: Exposition Press, 1954), p. 232.

¹²R. Keyser, op. cit., p. 149.

Those who were less strong wrestled first, and then one after the other, which caused great amusement. When most of them had wrestled, except the strongest, the boendr talked about who of these should contend against each of the sons of Thord; but no-one came forward. They went before different men and challenged them, with the same result. Thorbjorn Ongul looked around, and saw that there sat a man of large size, whose face was not familiar. Thornbjorn took hold of him, and pulled hard; but he sat still and did not move. Then Thorbjorn said: "No-one has sat so firm before me today as thou: but who art thou?" "My name is Gest," he replied. "If thou wilt take part in some game thou art a welcome guest." He answered: "It seems to me, many things may change, and I will not join in games with you, who are entirely unknown to me." Many said that he would do well if he, though a stranger, would give them some amusement. He asked what they wanted of him. They asked him to wrestle with someone. He said he had ceased to wrestle, "but," he added, "there was a time when I enjoyed it greatly."

Later the extract continues:

Thord rushed at Grettir but he stood firm without flinching. Grettir then stretched his hand to the back of Thord and got hold of his breeches, lifted him off his feet, over his head, and threw him down behind him, so that Thord's shoulders came down with a heavy thud. Then they said that the two brothers should attack him at the same time, and they did so; there was a hard tussle, and each had the better of it by turns, although Grettir always had one of them under him. They fell by turns on their knees or dragged each other along; they grasped each other so tightly that they were all blue and bloody. All thought this the greatest fun, and when they stopped thanked them for the wrestling; and it was the opinion of all who were present that the two brothers were not stronger than Grettir, though each of them had the strength of two strong men.¹³

In the Saga of Svarfdaela, Thord Fangari challenged Klaufi to a wrestling contest, and called him a coward if he would not:

They summoned many people to Hof, for Thord would not wrestle anywhere except there. They began and wrestled long, until a bondmaid came into the door of

¹³p. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 372.

the women's room, and called it bondmaid--wrestling, as neither of them fell, and told them to kiss each other and then stop. Klauf got angry at this, and raised Thord up on his breast, and threw him down so hard that all thought he was hurt.¹⁴

From the Saga of Viga Glum:

One summer at the Althing men were divided into two parties at the Fangabrekha (wrestling-brink slope), Nordlendings (men from the northern part of the land) and Vestfirdings (from the western fjords). The Nordlendings were defeated, and their leader was Mar, the son of Glum. Ingolf, the son of Thorvald of Rangarvellir, came there, Mar said: "Thou art a stout man; thou must be strong; be on my side in the wrestling." He answered: "I will do it for thy sake." The man who opposed him fell, and the second and the third also; this pleased the Nordlendings. Mar said: "If thou needest my help in words I will help thee; but what art thou going to do now? He answered: I have not decided on anything, but I would like best to go northward and get work." Mar said: I want thee to go with me."¹⁵

Even young children were encouraged to wrestle and grapple with each other. Thus, in the Story of the Ynglings, we read:

So on a certain winter were many fold come to Upsala, and King Yngvar was there, and his sons; and both Alf, the son of King Yngvar, and Ingiald, the son of King Onund, were six winters old. So these two fell to sporting as children do, and each was to rule over his band, and so when they played together, then was Ingiald proven feebler than Alf, and so ill he deemed that he wept sore thereover. Then came to him Gautvid his foster-brother, and led him away to Swipdag the Blind, his foster-father, and told him how it had gone ill with him, and that he was feebler and of less pith in the play than Alf, the son of King Yngvar. Then answered Swipdag that it was a great shame thereof.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., p. 373.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁶Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 55.

Wrestling appears not only to have been one of the most popular Viking physical activities from the contestants point of view, but was also a favourite spectator sport. This, it might be ventured, was synonymous with the aggressive nature of the Norsemen. As said before, they loved to grapple and show off their strength by getting their opponents under. As such wrestling amongst the Vikings was more often a display of strength rather than a science and an art, as was the case with wrestling amongst the ancient Greeks. Amongst the latter it was not sufficient to throw an opponent: it had to be done gracefully and in good style.¹⁷

It is surprising that boxing or pankration (a combination of boxing and wrestling indulged in by the ancient Greeks) type activities did not exist among the Norsemen as a sport.

Tug-of-War

Various forms of tug-of-war were indulged in by the Vikings, and were grouped under the common heading "skinnlekr", meaning literally "skin-game." One of these was called hraskinnleikr, and was played as follows: two persons held on to each end of a raw hide, and the one to pull the hide away from his opponent or drag his opponent

¹⁷E. N. Gardiner, Athletics of the Ancient World (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 181.

on to the ground was the victor. This game is briefly described in Saxo Grammaticus' history of Denmark:

Now the manner of combat was as follows: A ring, plaited of withy or rope, used to be offered to the combatants for them to drag away by wrenching it with a great effort of foot and hand; and the prize went to the stronger, for if either of the combatants could wrench it from the other, he was awarded the victory. Erik struggled in this manner, and grasping the rope sharply, wrested it out of the hands of his opponent. When Frode saw this, he said: "I think it is hard to tug at a rope with a strong man."¹⁸

Another game was to see if two people strong enough to tear the hide asunder between them. This exercise was known as skinndratr, meaning "skin-drawing" or "skin-pulling."

In another of these types of contests a man, if he were strong enough, would take a rope in each hand and challenge one or more to pull against him at each rope; and if he could do this, especially in a sitting posture, and gain victory over his opponents, it was considered a great honour.¹⁹

One of the best descriptions of tug-of-war among the Vikings is found in Hjalmter's and Olver's Saga:

The King said: "We (Hord and himself) will pull a goat's skin across the fire in this hall tomorrow." Early next morning they went into the hall; a large fire had been made there. A little after the King came, and

¹⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, The First Nine Books of the Danish History, translated by Oliver Elton (Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967), p. 203.

¹⁹ R. Keyser, op. cit., p. 150.

said: "I will get Hastigi to pull with thee Hord." Hord answered: "It is well for us to try skin-pulling; so make thyself ready Hastigi." Hastigi took off all his clothes, but Hord did not take off his fur coat. A very strong walrus-hide was given to them. Then they set to with hard grips and tuggings, and each alternately was successful. They soon pulled the hide asunder between them. The King ordered the ox-hide to be brought to them. Then they pulled with all their might and so hard that they were in danger of falling into the fire. Hastigi was the stronger but Hord was more agile and nimble. The King said: "Thou dost not pull, Hastigi, as thou allowest this child to struggle so long against thee." Hastigi replied: "It will not last long if I use all my strength." While they were speaking, Hjalmtér took the sword and the sax, and put them in front of the feet of Hord; nobody saw this because the fur cloak projected. Then Hastigi pulled so hard that Hord nearly fell into the fire, and thought he had never had such a tug. They both pulled so hard that all wondered that they were not dead from over-exertion and could endure it. Hord said to Hastigi: "Look out; for now I will use my strength, and thou wilt not live long." "I will," answered Hastigi. Hord then pulled with all his strength and pulled Hastigi forward into the fire, and threw the hide over him; he jumped on his back, and then went to his bench. The King ordered them to take the man out of the fire; he was much burnt. The King was very angry though he saw chiefly it was his own fault.²⁰

Another trial of strength consisted of the following: one man hooked his arm through another person's arm, and tried to pull him towards him, or else endeavoured to force him to straighten his arm and relax his hold; this was termed handkralkjast or hook-draw.²¹ It is uncertain whether this was done in a standing or seated position, but obviously either way would have presented an interesting contest of strength, although the latter would have been a better test

²⁰P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 378.

²¹R. Keyser, op. cit., p. 151.

of arm and shoulder strength only.

Wherever men conglomerate, they always have and always will indulge in various contests of strength. But attitudes and emphasis placed on winning differ from age to age and nation to nation. The Norsemen placed great emphasis on winning and sportsmanship was a quality not frequently observed. They became almost professional in their desire to win. They were self-centred and selfish in their sport, but were honorable in that they strictly observed rules and laws of their sports and games. Sport was indulged in not for the love of the games and contests but instead to enhance each individual's personal image.

Chapter VII

BALL GAMES

The Vikings loved their ball games and, as mentioned earlier, held games of up to two weeks duration or more for the express purpose of playing ball games. In these ball games the aggressive nature of the Norsemen is again well illustrated. There were three kinds of ball games: Knattleikr, Skofuleikr and Soppleikr.

Two fairly detailed studies have been made of knattleikr by Hertzberg¹, on the one hand, and Bjamason, on the other.² The following description of knattleikr is based on these two studies.

The playground for knattleikr was preferably on a frozen lake or fiord, where conditions were even and hard. When no ice was found the play took place on a field. Boundaries or goals were marked off. There were two teams opposed to each other. A referee, called the fyrirmaor, was selected. It was his duty to see that the rules of the game were observed, and to decide all points of dispute. He determined the boundaries of the playground and divided the players into teams so as to match the individual players of the two teams against each other.

¹E. Hertzberg, Nordboernes Gamle Boldspil. (Kristiana: Historiske Skrifter, 1904).

²B. Bjarnason, Nordboernes Legemlige Uddannelse i Oldtiden (Copenhagen, 1905).

Each player was matched against a certain player of the other side, of as nearly equal strength and agility as possible. The players so matched were special opponents during the whole game. This division in pairs of opponents of nearly equal strength (skipta jafnliga) was, indeed, the main principle on which the whole game rested, and which gave to it its peculiar saga-like character. In the contest between any player and his special opponent, in order to keep or to get the ball, none of the players had a right to interfere. The two players of each pair were placed quite close to each other. Both teams together filled the field and were scattered in pairs over it.

The object of the game was to carry the ball across the boundary or through the goal of the opponent (bera ut knottinn). After the ball was put in play, the players tried to catch it, and then endeavoured to carry or throw it through the goal, but in this each player was hindered by his special opponent.

The ball, which was called knottre, was very hard, being made of wood, and was probably not more than three inches in diameter.

Each of the players had his bat or racket called knatt-tre or knattgildra. As the word "gildra" means "to catch," it is possibly safe to assume that the bat was used not only to hit the ball but also to catch it and scoop it up. This being the case, Hertzberg assumes the bats must

have been broad-leaved and scoop-shaped.

The result of the game depended chiefly on strength. Hard throwing of the ball and fast running were required. Wrestling was a prominent feature also. It was the immediate object of the players, by pushing, tackling and other direct means, to keep their opponents away from the ball. The bat was often used in anger to strike an opponent, and even the ball at times served as a missile. The game, in fact, often became extremely violent; serious accidents, and even loss of life, were not infrequent occurrences.

One account of knattleikr is found in Viglund's

Saga:

There were often games of ball; many asked the brothers to go to the games; they said they had often been at these games and were rather rough-handed. The Jarl's men said they would take care of themselves whatever might happen. The next morning the brothers went to the games, and generally had the ball during the day; they pushed men and let them fall roughly, and beat others. At night three men had their arms broken, and many were bruised or maimed; the Jarl's men now thought themselves ill-treated, and this lasted for several days.³

Another reference to knattleikr comes from the Saga of Laxdaela:

He (Hall) asked Kjartan to take part in the games. "We want thee, kinsman, to show thy skill in them." Kjartan answered: "Little exercise did I have in games during the last time, for King Olaf employed himself in other matters, but this time I will not refuse thee." He made ready for the play and the strongest men were pitted against him. They played during the day, and no

³P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 376.

man equalled Kjartan, either in strength or skill.⁴

It is interesting to note that Hertzberg compares knattleikr with the game of lacrosse, especially as played by the Canadian Indians. This comparison, he believes, establishes a strong resemblance, almost an identity, between the main features of the two games. Hertzberg concludes as probable that there must exist a close, historic relationship between them, and that an importation of knattleikr might have taken place from the Norseman to the Indian tribes of the northeastern coasts of America, and from there farther inland. It is also possible, of course, that the diffusion of the activity was in the opposite direction.

This view, however, has met with categorical opposition from Bjarnason who maintains that there is no safe basis on which to establish a relationship between the two games, since they differ in essential features.

The difficulty in deciding the question lies in the fact that, although knattleikr is frequently mentioned in the Sagas, it is nowhere described in a connected and detailed manner. The rules can only be inferred with more or less uncertainty from the incidental mention of episodes in the game. The rules thus inferred do differ in some respects from the rules of lacrosse which is a point in favour of Bjarnason's argument. But basically lacrosse and

⁴Ibid., p. 378.

Knattleikr are similar which could imply that either the Norsemen brought knattleikr to North America or that the Norsemen took lacrosse from North America. But the possibility that the game evolved spontaneously in both cultures should not be discounted either.

Skofuleikr

Very little is known about skofuleikr, another ball game. It is known that certain instruments were used in it called skofur, sometimes made out of horn. The game was very rough, and lives were frequently lost in playing it. The following extract from Hord's Saga gives a good picture of social circumstances often surrounding these ball games:

Kolgrim sent word to the men of Botn to have skofuleikr and knattleikr at Sand to which they agreed. The games began and continued until after Yule; the men of Botn were usually defeated, for Kolgrim arranged it so that men from Strander were the stronger in the game. Many shoes were used up by the men of Botn, as they often walked there; and the hide of the ox was cut up into shoes. The people thought Kolgrim wanted to know about the disappearance of the ox, and therefore had had these games; he thought he recognized the hide of the ox on their feet. Then they were called ox-men, and again were ill-used. At home they talked about this ill-treatment, and said they would soon give up the games. Hord spoke harshly to them, saying that they were great cowards if they dared not to take revenge, and were ready only for evil-doings. Then Thord and Thorgeir Gyrðilskeggi, an outlaw, had come to Hord. Hord had made them horn scrapers during the night. Every man was ready to go to the game when Hord went, though they were rather backward before. Onund Thormoddson of Brekka was to play against Hord; he was a popular and strong man. The game was very rough, and before evening six of the men of Strandir lay dead, but none of the men of Botn; and both parties went home.⁵

This extract throws light, once again, on some characteristics of the Vikings, and also the rugged nature

⁵Ibid., p. 377.

of their sports. It is also interesting to note here that ball games were played against other districts, and that the teams were purposely but secretly unevenly balanced at times corresponding to modern-day practices of "loading" teams and "fixing" contests and matches.

Soppleikr

As with skofuleikr, little is known about soppleikr except that it must have been a very rough game as evidenced by the following extract from Herraad and Bosi's Saga:

Once the king (Hring) had a game called soppleikr; it was played with eagerness, and they tried Bosi in it; but he played roughly and one of the king's men had his hand put out of joint. The next day he broke the thigh bone of a man and the third day two men attacked him, while many were harassing him; he knocked out the eye of one with the ball, and knocked down another man and broke his neck.⁶

The Breidvikings used to have games of ball during the long winter nights; and when these took place shelters called playhalls, were built for the people, for the games often lasted for a fortnight. Reference to these playhalls is made in the Saga of the Ere-Dwellers:

It was the custom of the men of Breidavik in the Autumn to have games of ball about the winter nights under the shoulder south of Cnear; the place thereafter was called the playball-meads, and men betook themselves thither from all the countryside, and great playballs were made there wherein men abode and dwelt there half a month or more.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 375.

⁷Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892), volume II, p. 112.

So popular were these ball games that they were played not only at the Thing meetings, but in some areas the men from large districts of the country also met after the harvest for the express purpose of indulging their fondness for them. This is well illustrated in the Saga of Laxdaela:

Games were then held in Asbjarnarnes, and men gathered for them from many districts, from Vididal, from Midjiord, Vatnsnes, Vatnsdal and all the way from Langadal.⁸

Descriptions of these ball games in the sagas once again throws light on the true character of the Vikings. They reveal the Vikings as being very competitive, with a strong desire to be victorious, even at the expense of life and limb. It seems that these games were also an outlet for inner tensions, in that personal differences and family feuds were often settled on the playing field.

The ball games of the Vikings for which evidence exists, seem all to have involved hitting a missile with a club or stick, and involved rugged body contact. They would then have been characterized by rough play and body checking such as in modern day ice-hockey and lacrosse, and would have lacked the grace and movements of certain ball games played by some ancient civilizations such as the Greeks. The very nature of the Vikings ball games would thus have excluded women from participating.

⁸P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., p. 378.

Chapter VIII

HUNTING, HAWKING AND FISHING

Hunting

From the most remote times the chase was a favourite pastime with the old kings and heroes among the Northmen, as indeed, it has been with nearly all civilizations. The common people, of course, used to practice the hunt as a means of subsistence, rather than as a pastime.

In the early Middle Ages Scandinavian waters teemed with fish to an even greater degree than at present, and an abundance of game was found in virtually every part of the land. Hence many northmen eked out their larders and added to their wealth by taking toll from the wild life about them. The humbler people, in the more out-of-the-way parts lived, in many instances, entirely upon hunting; the wild land and water animals supplied not only food but clothing as well. The Lapps excelled in catching sea mammals, and passed on some of this skill to their blonde neighbours.¹

Among the more prosperous, hunting was primarily a summer occupation or pastime. But those to whom it was a means of livelihood hunted all the year round, pursuing their quarry by following, upon skis, their tracks in the snow.²

¹F. Nansen, In Northern Mists; Arctic Exploration in Early Times, translated by A. G. Charter (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1911), volume I, p. 224.

²M. W. Williams, Social Scandinavia in the Viking Age (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920), p. 180.

The animals usually sought were common deer, reindeer, elks, wild hogs, wolves, martens, otters, sables, lynxes, wild cats, squirrels, hares, brown bears, polar bears and various kinds of foxes. Most of these animals were found in continental Scandinavia, while only a few were native to Iceland. The white bear was limited to Greenland and Iceland.³

Hunting of the larger animals, such as the bears and wild boars, was carried on with spears, especially the kind called svitha.⁴ After the spear, the bow and arrow were most commonly used. For shooting birds a special arrow, the kolfo⁵, with a flat head, was employed. The old hunting god Ull, called veithiass, was also god of skiing; it is related also of the goddess Skathi that she went on skis with a bow and shot animals.⁶ Clearly of primeval antiquity was the use of pits, called grof, and of enclosing traps such as the bjarnbass or ulfskus, of which some survivals can still be seen, and likewise snares (gildra) of various kinds.⁷ The hunter was, in addition, always equipped with a short, sharp

³E. Henderson, Iceland (Edinburgh, 1818), volume I, p. 355.

⁴H. Shetelig and E. Falk, Scandinavian Archaeology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 306.

⁵Ibid., p. 306.

⁶Ibid., p. 306.

⁷Ibid., p. 306.

hunting knife, which he used for attacking at short range. especially in self-defense, and also for skinning and cutting up the animals when killed.

The trained hunting dog was the invaluable companion of the Scandinavian hunter; he scared the game out of its hiding place, helped his master by chasing and worrying it, and brought the smaller animals to him after they had been shot. There was probably more than one kind of dog used for such purposes. In Dahlsland, Sweden, the hunting dog was particularly large and powerful. It had long gray hair, with dark markings, and was probably related to the Saint Bernard. This animal was also highly prized in Norway, where it had been introduced from Sweden; in Denmark, the ancestors of the breed now known as Danish were probably the favourite hunters.⁸

The old Northmen understood the art of training dogs from the most remote ages. A hunting dog, in the old language, was called dyrhundr. The Norwegian chiefs used to keep a great many dogs, as may be seen from the Sagas, which speak of special servants being employed to take charge of them. These servants were called hundasveinar.

Dogs were also used to hunt humans. In other words, they were used to track down wanted people by following their scent. Several such examples can be quoted from the Sagas.

⁸M. W. Williams, op. cit., p. 181.

In the Saga of Olaf the Holy:

The next morning, when men were aware of their running away, they fared after them with sleuth-hounds, and happened on them in the wood where they had hidden, and brought them back home and put them into a bower.⁹

Besides hunting-dogs there were other kinds of dogs, that might be mentioned here, among which were shepherd and watch-dogs. In Olaf Tryggvason's Saga:

A bondi came there and asked Olaf to give him back his cows. Olaf replied that he might take them if he could recognize them and not delay their journey. The bondi had with him a large sheep-dog. He pointed out to it the herd of cattle, which numbered many hundreds. The dog ran through all the herds, and took away as many cows as the bondi had said belonged to him, and they were all marked with the same mark. Then they acknowledged that the dog had found out the right cattle. They thought it was a wonderfully wise dog. The dog's name was Vigi, and it was the best of all dogs.¹⁰

There were special laws regarding dogs. In the

Frostath Laws:

If a man kills a lapdog of another he must pay twelve aurar if the dog is a lapdog whose neck one can embrace with one hand, the fingers touching each other; six aurar are to be paid for a greyhound (mjokund), and for a hunting-dog half a mark, and also for a sheep-dog. One aurar is to be paid for a dog guarding the house, if it is killed.¹¹

In the legislation of the early Christian period

⁹Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quartich, 1894), volume II, p. 296.

¹⁰P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 352.

¹¹Ibid., p. 352.

there were laws for the regulation of hunting, many of which doubtless originated far back in pagan times. Hunting in the community forests was free to the whole population, except for the restrictions imposed by the legislation for the protection of the game, which seem to have been in force virtually throughout the North, though the most numerous instances are found in the Swedish law codes. In most provinces of Sweden the squirrel and the hare were protected several months each year. Punishment for the violation of the protective laws was, as a rule, in the form of fines, sometimes as high as three marks.¹² The wolf, however, was regarded as man's greatest enemy, and they were ruthlessly slaughtered.

Sometimes animals caught in traps, if uninjured, were permitted to live in captivity, especially if they were young. These animals were kept as pets or sold for the same purpose. This seems to have been particularly the case with bears, for which there was a demand. Polar bears, for instance, were regarded as a worthy gift for nobles or kings, for they were not known in Europe until the settlement of Iceland and, hence, were considered a curiosity. In the Book of Settlements, written by Are and his contemporaries, an episode is recorded regarding the presentation of polar bears as gifts:

¹²K. Weinhold, Altnordisches Leben (Berlin, 1856), p. 66.

Ingi-mund lit upon a white she-bear, and two cubs with her, on a mere there, and called it Cub-mere. After that Ingi-mund went abroad, and gave the bears to King Harold. White bears had never been seen before in Norway.¹³

It seems likely that the wild cat or marten cat, was also made a pet, for some of the passages in the ancient sources seem to apply to this animal, rather than to the small domestic cat. Indeed, there has been some question as to whether the common cat had been domesticated in the North as early as the Viking Age, though it was a household animal by the twelfth century, even in Iceland.¹⁴

Sea mammals also made a valuable contribution to the comfort and prosperity of the ancient Scandinavians. Common seals were numerous along the northern coasts, as were also dolphins and walruses. These animals were at times secured by being clubbed to death in the rookeries, or caught in nets in the creeks and inlets along the shore. Such nets are mentioned in the Havardz Saga:

He asked: "What then dost thou want, sister?" I want thee to lend me thy seal nets." He answered: "There are three seal nets, and one is very old and not to be trusted now, though it has been a good one; but two are new and untried, take which thou wilt."¹⁵

¹³G. Vigufsson and F. York Powell, (ed.), Origines Islandicae (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), volume I, p. 128.

¹⁴R. Cleasby and G. Vigfusson, An Icelandic-English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1874).

¹⁵G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, op. cit., volume II, p. 267.

More often, however, seals were hunted in boats with harpoons. Whales were also hunted in this manner, but frequently the Northmen obtained them through sick or dead animals being washed ashore. The Saga of Grettir the Strong tells how, when a large Rorgual whale was washed ashore, the men of Vik and the men of Kalbak fought for possession of the carcase:

Hard were the blows which were dealt at Rifsker;
No weapons they had but steaks of the whale.
They belaboured each other with rotten blubber,
Unseemly methinks is such warfare for men.¹⁶

These sea mammals were valued not so much as a source of meat but more for their oil. Seals were highly prized for their fur; the ivory of the walrus was in demand for making small fine articles, like combs, dice and chessmen. In the western islands the bones of the whale came in handy for building purposes.

Whaling and sealing undoubtedly involved a high degree of physical fitness including strength, cardiovascular fitness, mobility and agility. This must especially have been the case when harpooning whales from boats. There was an element of danger and consequently an element of excitement, challenge and sport. This suited the Norse character admirably.

¹⁶J. G. D. Clark, Prehistoric Europe. The Economic Basis (Stanford: University Press, 1966), p. 65.

Hawking and Fowling

Bird life was abundant in Scandinavia, and among the land birds which were hunted were partridges, woodcocks, grouse, hawks, falcons and eagles. Sea-fowl were particularly numerous, particularly along the coasts of Norway and Iceland and the smaller islands to the south. This class of game included tern, swans, geese and ducks, particularly the eider duck, all of which were sought by the fowler.¹⁷

Birds of the forest as well as the water fowl were taken by means of nets and snares, and bows and arrows. At times the fowlers climbed up the rugged cliffs, or lowered themselves from their tops, to the nests, and siezed the birds with their hands. Birds were also, of course, caught with the aid of hawks or falcons. Hawking was however, the sport of the rich rather than the serious work of the fowler, who could better and more quickly secure his prey by other means.

For hawking not only the ger-falcon was trained but also smaller kinds of the genus accipiter, which are collectively called haukar, or hawks. It is a well-known fact that hawking was a favourite pastime throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, and even to a later date. There is good reason for believing that it was principally owing to the Northmen, who had settled in France, that it was so

¹⁷M. H. Williams, op. cit., p. 184.

highly esteemed. Hawking is not mentioned in the Roman accounts of the countries conquered by them, and the primitive civilization of the tribes inhabiting Germania in the Roman period did not admit of such a pastime. Norwegian falcons were always held in great repute in foreign countries, and the Kings of Norway could scarcely make a more valuable present to foreign princes than these birds. The inference drawn from the Sagas that men, when going on a journey, had their hawks with them, is supported by the Bayeux Tapestry, where numerous chiefs are seen with these birds.

A very good example of the sport of hawking, as written in the Sagas, comes from the Story of Olaf the Holy:

Befell it early on a day that the king rode abroad with his hawks and hounds, and his men with him. But when they flew the hawks, the king's hawk slew in one swoop two heathcocks; and forthwith he made another swoop, and then slew three heathcocks. The hounds ran beneath it so as to catch up every fowl that fell to earth.¹⁸

When Hrolf Kraki and his men walked into the hall of King Adils at Upsala, it is said:

They had their hawks on their shoulders, and it was thought a great ornament in those times. King Hrolf had a hawk called Habrok.¹⁹

Hawks were even protected by law. Thus, in the earlier Frostathings Law:

¹⁸Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 140.

¹⁹P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 351.

If a man kills a hawk on a man's hand, he shall pay a mark valued in silver and damages for the outrage.²⁰

There is no doubt that women in Norway used to amuse themselves with hawking as well as the men, for it is written that they had their own trained birds. When King Olaf Tryggvason's sister Astrid refused to marry Erling Skjalgsson, the king evinced his displeasure by having the feathers plucked out of her hawk. Still, it was more usual for the women:

. . . to amuse themselves in the nut groves during the summer time, while the men went out to follow the chase.²¹

Fishing

During the Viking Age, though the population of Northern Europe was much smaller than now, most varieties of fish were probably more abundant, and they formed an exceedingly important article of foreign commerce, as well as a standard article of diet at home. But it is also reasonably safe to assume that fishing must also have been a form of entertainment and sport for many, particularly among the more prosperous, who had more leisure time at their disposal.

Fish most commonly caught were salmon, trout, herring, cod, mackerel, sturgeon, perch and pike. Salmon and

²⁰ Ibid., p. 352.

²¹ R. Keyser, Private Life of the Old Northmen (London: 1868), p. 172.

trout were found in most of the rivers, and formed the staple diet of the poor along many parts of the coast. Herring were plentiful in most of the surrounding waters, and were very important commercially. The centre of the cod industry was the Lofoten Islands, off the Northwest coast of Norway, on which was Vaagen, the great fishing market of Europe.²²

Sea-fishing at a certain distance from the mainland was free to all, but in most areas river and lake fishing were governed by law. Persons owning the land bordering upon these places had special fishing rights there. In Are's Book of Settlements was written:

He had a fishery in Waterdale river with Ingimund; and the Temple men had the first right of going on to the river to fish.²³

Boats having but one pair of oars were frequently employed for fresh-water fishing, and also along the coasts. For the former use, the vessels were often short and somewhat blunt in order that they might more easily be propelled along winding streams. But the usual fishing-boat generally held two or three men. It was also propelled by oars; but large vessels fitted with sails were used for fishing on a more extensive scale or at a greater distance from home.²⁴

²²K. Weinhold, op. cit., p. 68.

²³G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, op. cit., volume I, p. 129.

²⁴W. H. Williams, op. cit., p. 189.

Fishing tackle included nets, lines of yarn or raw-hide, hooks of metal or bone, sinkers of metal, bone or stone, spears and harpoons, bows and arrows and a broad heavy knife with which to kill the fish after having landed it.²⁵ If the fishing were done by hook and line, bait in the form of worms or small fish was taken along. The smaller fish were taken by hooks or nets, but large ones, like salmon and sturgeon, were generally speared.

Fishing for the purpose of sport and fun must have been mainly in the form of spear fishing and bait fishing. It is even possible that fly-fishing was known, for in some old Icelandic expressions "fly" is used metaphorically for "lure" or "bait." Sometimes there were deliberate attempts to improve natural resources; for instance, there are trout in certain high mountain lakes in Norway which could only have been introduced by human agency, and an eleventh-century rune stone records that the man for whom it was raised "brought the fish" to one such little lake.²⁶

For some people living on the Norwegian fiords, fishing was not only their main source of protein, but also one of their main sources for physical activity and exercise. Building and rowing fishing boats, handmaking all the fish-

²⁵H. Shetelig and E. Falk, op. cit., p. 306.

²⁶J. Simpson, Everyday Life in the Viking Age (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1967), p. 48.

ing tackle, catching, cleaning, and processing the fish, must have provided a hardy existence.

In conclusion it might be said that the upper strata of Norse society indulged in hunting, hawking and fishing for pleasure and not through necessity, whilst the lower levels of society obviously pursued these activities for economic reasons. But in either case these activities required physical fitness and skill, and it is these two qualities that can transform any activity through modification into a challenging, enjoyable and competitive pastime and sport.

Chapter IX

GAMES

It would be incorrect to conclude that Scandinavians only appreciated physical prowess and violent sports; on the contrary, the ideal man was expected to master a wide range of mental, verbal and artistic skills. Earl Rognvald of the Orkneys (1135-1158 A.D.) could boast of nine assorted talents, all traditional ones ascribed again and again, in varying combinations, to legendary or historical heroes:

There are nine skills known to me -
At "tables" I play ably'
Rarely I run out of runes;
Reading, smith-craft, both come ready;
I can skim the ground on skis,
Wield a bow, do well in rowing;
To both arts I can bend my mind:
Poet's lay and harper's playing.¹

Board Games

First on Rognvald's list is the ability to play "tables." This rather vague term referred to any one of several games that could be played on a marked board. Old Norse has various compound names for these games, suggesting that several varieties of "tables" were known, but the texts throw little light on how they were played. It is known, for example, that in the game Hnot-tafl the pieces were called hunar. Hnefa-tafl was played with black and white discs; one of these discs, probably the most important, was

¹J. Simpson, Everyday Life in the Viking Age (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1967), p. 162.

called hnefi, from which the name of this game was probably derived.² This game might have been similar to, but not the same game as, our modern draughts, which only reached Europe at the very end of the medieval period. Although gaming-pieces are among the commonest objects in Viking graves, it is unfortunately rarely possible to decide whether the set is complete. One set unearthed at Birka, Sweden, and dated at the ninth century, has twenty-seven gaming-pieces made of glass. These consist of nine in dark green glass, seventeen in light blue-green, and a centre "king" with dark blue facial features, a crown and decorative threads around the body.³

In a single Viking coffin unearthed at Valloby were found what appeared to be two sets of gaming-pieces, one set on each side of the skeleton. The set on the right was comprised of forty-six pieces resembling modern checkers. Sixteen were dark red, the others of a whitish colour. On the left of the skeleton were another sixty of these gaming-pieces, thirty-one of which were black, the others whitish. With these was a small amethyst stone with a rough unworked surface.⁴

²P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 353.

³H. Arbman, The Vikings (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), p. 198.

⁴P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume I, p. 250.

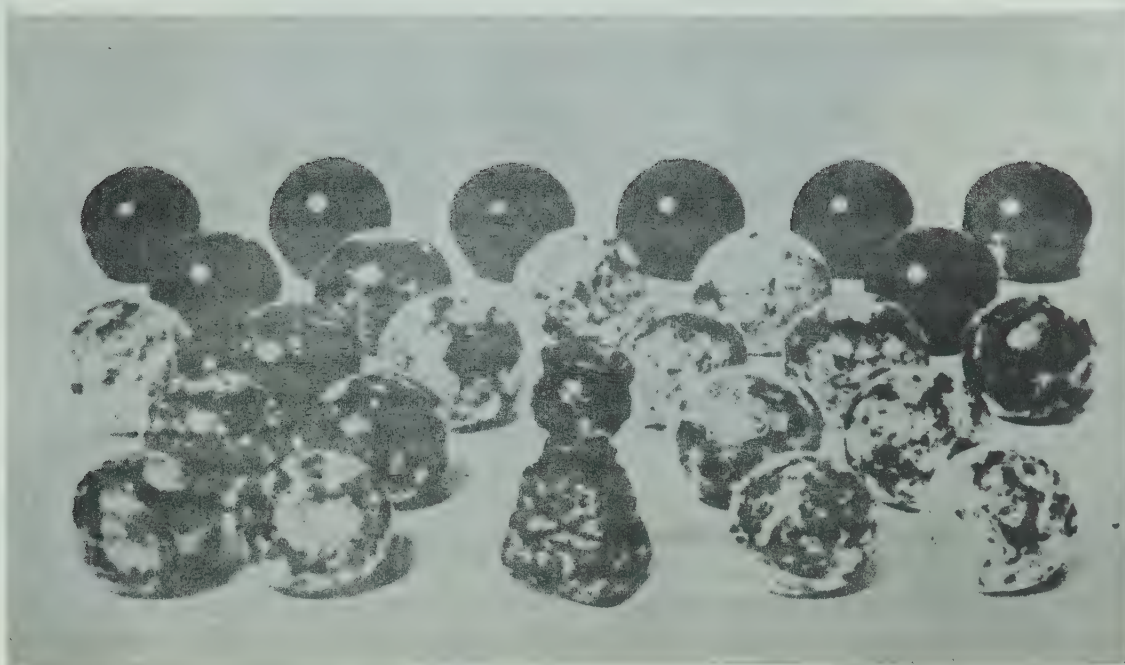


Fig. 18. Glass pieces from a game dated to the ninth century.



Fig. 19. Chessmen found at Uig, Isle of Lewis dated to 1100 A.D.

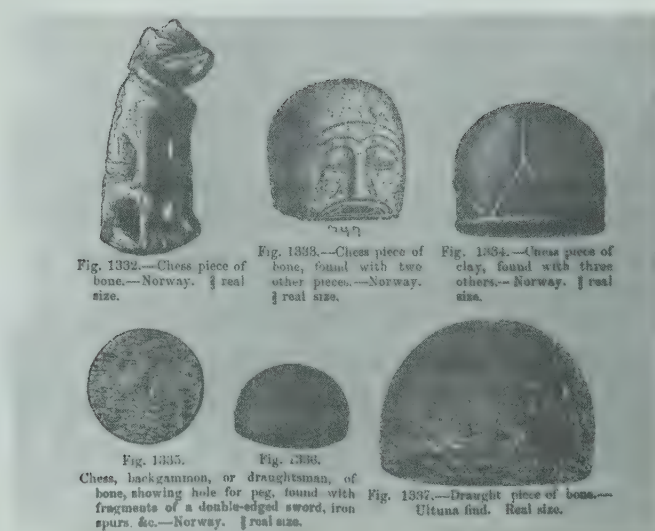


Fig. 20. Gaming pieces of the Viking Age discovered at Ultuna, Norway.



Fig. 21. Chesspiece.



Fig. 22. Gaming pieces and dice.

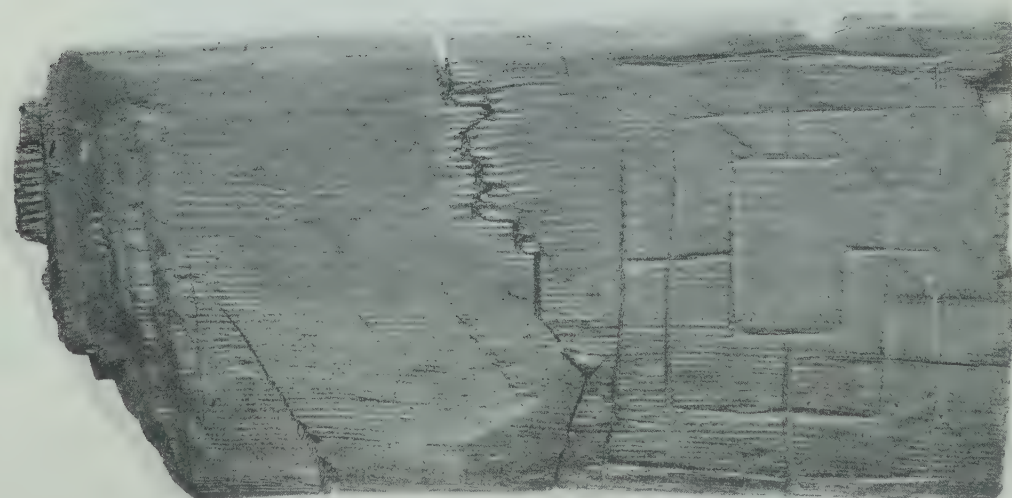


Fig. 23. Gaming board.



Fig. 24. Gaming board in yew wood found at Ballinderry.

With regard to hnefa-tafl there was written in

Fridthjof's Saga:

Fridthjof sat at hnefa-tafl when Hilding came. He said to Bjorn, with whom he played the game: "There is an empty space brother, and thou shalt not make a move but I will attack the red piece, and see if thou canst guard it." Bjorn said: "Here are two choices, and we can move in two ways." Fridthjof answered: "It is best to attack the hnefi (highest piece) first and then it is easy to choose what to do.⁵

The finest gaming-board yet found comes from Balinderry, near Limerick. The Department of Anthropology of Harvard University conducted research aimed at discovering when and where this gaming-board was made, how and when did it reach Ireland, and for what game was the board intended. After completing their research the Harvard team concluded that the Ballinderry gaming-board was a product of Celto-Norse art of the Isle of Man of the tenth century. It is related to the school of Manx sculpture associated with the name Gaut Bjarnarson. It was made for an early game on the principle of the Swedish game of fox and geese. It reached Ballinderry by way of the Shannon through the agency of the Limerick Danes during or a little before the reign of Magnus Haraldsson of Limerick, who from approximately 973 to 977 A.D. was king of Man and the Isles. In spite of its somewhat decadent ornament, it holds a high place among the extremely rare examples of wood-carving of these early centuries, and it casts an interesting sidelight

⁵Ibid., volume II, p. 355.

on life in Ireland and Great Britain during the Viking Age.⁶

It appears, also that a game very similar to modern-day chess can be distinguished in the Sagas. This game was termed Skak or Skaktafl, and playing pieces of this game have been discovered and preserved. Judging from the Sagas, to learn the game was part of the education of the high-born, and was considered idrottir. It must have been a pastime on board ship, for in many of the pieces found are little holes in the centre for pegs, which made them fast and prevented them from being upset or changing place when the vessel rolled.

In regard to the date of the introduction of chess into Iceland, Fiske⁷, the Icelandic historian, writes that Iceland's famous chronicler, Snorri Sturluson, was acquainted with the game when he narrated, in St. Olaf's Saga, the story of King Canute the Great and his retainer, Jarl Ulf the rich. This Saga was composed about the year 1230 A.D., but the incident related occurred two hundred years previous, so that if Snorri's account can be accepted as absolutely correct, it might be inferred that chess had become an accustomed diversion at the courts of Scandinavia by 1030 A.D.

In quoting the Sagas, where chess is possibly the

⁶H. O. Hencken, "A Gaming Board of the Viking Age" Acta Archaeologica IV, 1933.

⁷W. Fiske, Chess in Iceland and Icelandic Literature (Florence, 1885), p. 7.

game in question, only those passages in which the word skak or skaktafl or skakbord or the names of pieces given, indicate that the incident recounted relates to chess and not to some other game at "tables," will be discussed.

In the Saga of Olaf the Holy:

After the battle at the river Helga, Ulf Jarl made a feast for Knut at Roiskelda. They played skaktafl, but the king was very gloomy. . . . When they had played for a while, the Jarl took one of the king's knights; the king put the piece back and told him to make another move. The Jarl got angry, upset the chessboard, and went away.⁸

The boards themselves were often very costly, being sometimes made of gold, and were considered as valuable gods; inheritances, and as worthy of adorning the temples of the gods; they were such treasures that Hrolf Nefia, at the risk of his life, sought to capture one in the temple of Bjarmaland. This incident is related in the Sturlaug's Saga:

He looked into the temple and saw a very large (image of) Thor sitting in a high seat; in front of him was a splendid table covered with silver. . . . He saw a skakbord and chesspieces of bright gold.⁹

It is not surprising to read in the Sagas that chess was a popular means of entertainment during the long winter evenings. In the Saga of Thorfinn Karlsefni, for example:

In Brattahlid (a farm), in Greenland, during the winter, they often amused themselves with chess-playing,

⁸Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1894), volume II, p. 326.

⁹P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 353.

and saga-telling, and many things that could improve their homelife.¹⁰

It was customary for women, as well as men, to play chess, as may be seen in the Saga of Gunnlaug Ormstunga:

He and Helga often amused themselves with chess; they soon liked each other well, as was afterwards seen. They were almost of the same age.¹¹

The temper of the players did not always remain unruffled. This is well illustrated in the Sturlunga Saga:

It happened that Thorgils Bodvarsson and Sam Magnusson quarrelled over a game of chess; Sam wanted to move back a knight which he had exposed, but Thorgils would not allow it. Markus Mardarson advised them to move the knight back and not quarrel. Thorgils said he would not take his advice, and upset the chess, put the pieces into the bag, rose and struck Sam on the ear so that blood flowed.¹²

Dice

That dice playing was a very ancient pastime with the Old Northmen may be inferred from the fact that in several barrows, dating back to the Early Iron Age, dice made of bone have been found. Two excavation sites, where several of these dice were found, are Ultuna and Kannikegaard.¹³ The dice are different in shape to those of modern day, as

¹⁰Ibid., p. 354.

¹¹Ibid., p. 354.

¹²Ibid., p. 355.

¹³O. Montelius, Civilization of Sweden in Heathen Times (London, 1888), p. 114.

they do not form a perfect cube, and the two end surfaces have either no mark at all upon them, or one eye on each. On the other sides there are three, four, five and six eyes; but the number two is missing in each case. It appears, from the Sagas, that dice similar to those now used came into fashion soon after the introduction of Christianity. The Konge-speilet¹⁴ was a dice game played for money, but was not always regarded as a practice worthy of a man of education.

A very good account of a game of dice comes from the Saga of Olaf the Holy:

On Hising (an island at the mouth of the Gauta river) was a district which had at one time belonged to Norway and at another to Gautaland. The kings agreed to cast lots about the possession thereof, and throw dice, and that he should have it who threw the highest. The Swedish king threw two sixes, saying that King Olaf need not throw; but he replied, shaking the dice in his hand, "there are yet two sixes on the dice, and it is easy for God, my lord, to let them turn up again." He threw and got two sixes. Olaf King of Sweden threw and again got two sixes. Olaf King of Norway threw and there was on the one dice six, but the other burst asunder, and then there was seven. He then took possession of the district.¹⁵

Torfleikr

Finally, there is reference to a game played with pieces of turf, which might be compared to modern games

¹⁴R. Keyser, The Private Life of the Old Northmen (London: Chapman and Hall, 1868), p. 165.

¹⁵Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume II, p. 166.

such as bean bags and horseshoe pitching. The game was called torfleikr, and in it two people pelted each other with pieces of turf, or aimed the piece of turf at a stake in the ground. This game was not held in any great repute. The following extract comes from the Saga of the Ere Dwellers:

But the next morning the men had a turf-play (torfleikr), and as Thorlak's sons passed by, forth flew a great piece of turf, and smote Thord Bligh on the nape of the neck; and the blow was so hard that he fell head over heels. And when he got up he saw the sons of Thorbrand laughing heartily at him.¹⁶

The origin's of the games referred to in this chapter are not always easy to establish as a diversity of theories have been and still are being formulated. But it can be said with safety that these games, especially the board games and dice games, were not native to Norse culture but were borrowed as a result of Viking maritime activity. Local variations of the games may well have evolved and the Vikings in all probability passed these games on to other countries in the course of their travels. These games were popular with both rich and poor, as has been illustrated, and provided the few opportunities when women could compete against men in a recreational activity. Finally it does seem that there is a resemblance between the variations of board games played by the Vikings and certain modern day board games such as chess.

¹⁶W. Morris and E. Magnusson, (ed.), The Saga Library (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892), volume II, p. 109.

Chapter X

FEASTING, MUSIC AND DANCE

As is still true in the Scandinavian countries, much time was given by the Vikings to feasting; eating and drinking together was a sign of mutual esteem and good will. Perhaps in mid-winter, when most of the twenty-four hours were shrouded in darkness, the Viking's social instincts appeared to be most keen, and it was then that they most appreciated their fellow men and felt greater need for their companionship. Thus feasts were invariably ceremonies of friendship, and the refusal of a guest to partake of the food and drink offered to him was likely to cause serious offense to the family of the host. This attitude applied particularly to the partaking of beverages, and partially accounts for the intemperance of the Norsemen at their social gatherings, and for the consequent carousals. In order to guard against possible trouble, before the feasting began the host took the precaution to pronounce "peace over the meeting," an action which doubtless placed some restraint upon the banqueters, and contributed to the preservation of harmony; nevertheless, the gatherings were not infrequently characterized by drunken brawls, at times ending in bloodshed and loss of life.¹

Though the women frequently drank with the men, less

¹R. Keyser, The Private Life of the Old Northmen (London: Chapman and Hall, 1868), p. 140.

significance was attached to their drinking and less pains were taken to induce them to consume large quantities of the liquor; and, therefore, the women usually kept their wits about them, and when drunken quarrels arose they aided the host in his efforts to restore peace. A common device which they employed when the men became violent was to throw large cloths or pieces of clothing over the fighters, thus confusing them and preventing them from getting at each other with their weapons.² But reconciliation generally came after a night's sleep-perhaps only to be followed by a new quarrel when drinking was continued the next day.

Various devices were used to make the drinking more interesting and to increase the consumption of beverages, presumably to strengthen and cement the ties of friendship. The banqueters not only drank toasts, or skaals, to one another and to the chief dieties of the Scandinavian North, but engaged in drinking contests as well. Two sides, or opposite neighbours, might drink against each other; or one person might challenge another to drink what remained in the horn of the former. A form of entertainment connected with the banquet was to punish those who neglected to drink heartily by imposing a fine upon them for their failure to be sociable. In the Licsvetninga Saga, the Norwegian Viking Harec challenged the Icelfander Brand to a drinking contest:

²Ibid., p. 143.

One day Harec walked up to Brand with a great horn and asked him to drink halves with him, but Brand declared he would not drink against him. "I have not too much wit, even though I do not drink out of me what little I have, and thou wilt want all they wit, as far as I can see in thee." Harec drank off half and asked Brand to drink half, but he would not touch it. Harec declared he should have it all the same, and struck him on the head with the horn, and the drink ran down over Brand. Then Harec went to his place and fell to mocking Brand. But Brand would not get angry and turned it into game.³

Heitstrenging, or the making of solemn vows, also took place. A part of this ceremony was the drinking of a toast to Bragi, the deity who presided over minstrelsy. The vows made at these times were generally concerned with some deed which the drinker swore to perform; and the making of them was probably a thinly veiled form of bragging.

Another form of amusement which took place when groups of men were gathered in the halls was called "man-matching." In this, two or more members of the company chose men of prominence whose reputations they wished to exalt. These men would defend against the champions selected by the others. This is noted for example, in the Eyrbyggja Saga:

There were many pastimes. There was a talk over man-matching to find out who was the noblest man in the country-side, and the greatest chief, and men were not all agreed, as often happens mostly when there is a talk over man-matching.⁴

³G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, (ed.), Origines Islandicae (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), volume II, p. 377.

⁴Ibid., p. 117.

Sometimes two chieftains or men of power would match each other in this way. In the Saga of Sigurd Jorsalafara the brothers Sigurd and Eystein indulged in such man-matching at a feast one evening:

Then answered King Sigurd: "Dost thou not remember that I could force thee backward when I wished, and thou wast a year older?" King Eystein answered: "I remember this no less, that thou didst not take to such sport as needed agility."

Then said King Sigurd: "Rememberest thou how it went with us in swimming? I could put thee under water whenever I would."

Eystein said: "I swam no shorter distance than thou, and was not a worse sea-swimmer. Skill have I too on ice skates, so that I know no man who could match me; but thou has no more skill that way than an ox."

King Sigurd answered: "A more princely and useful accomplishment I deem it, to be skilled with the bow; thou, I believe, couldst not bend my bow, though thou shouldst set thy foot against it."

Eystein said: "I am not so bow-strong as thou art; but for straight shooting there is little odds between us. And I have far better skill than thou hast on snow-shoes; and that has ever been held a good accomplishment."

Sigurd said: "Tis thought to be a princely distinction that he who is to be ruler over other men should be tall above his troop, strong and better at his weapons than others, easily seen, easily known, when many are together."

Eystein said: "No less is this a distinguishing mark that a man be comely; for on comeliness brave apparel sits well. I am also much more learned in law than thou; and whatever we may talk about, I am much more fluent."

Sigurd answered: "It may be thou hast learned more tricks of law, for I had other work to do. And I question not thy fluency of speech. But many say that thou are not very true to thy word, and that it matters little what thou dost promise; thou speakest to suit those who at the time are present. And this is not kingly."⁵

⁵W. C. Greene (ed.), Translations from the Icelandic (New York: Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1966), pp. 115-116.

This variety of pastime was likely to result in quarrels, as can be imagined, but the average Northman seems to have dearly loved a quarrel. Even more provocative of arguments was the very common custom at feasts of making satirical rhymes. Sometimes a person having a gift for rhyming would make personal attacks upon other members of the company; but more frequently the rhyming took the form of a contest between two different people for mere pleasure or a prize. Such an attack or contest was called tongue-ply or flyting. Those who took part in this pastime lashed others most abusively with their tongues, the one asking mocking questions to which the other returned insulting replies. This pastime is mentioned again and again in the Sagas, the Licsvetninga Saga and Njala's Saga, to mention but two. In the former:

And when he (Harec) saw the Icclander he mocked him in many ways. Now it went so for a time and they fell to verses, and Brand got the better of this and Harec got always the worst.⁶

Saga telling--the narration of events connected with the careers of prominent men, living or dead--formed a more dignified and pleasing form of entertainment at social gatherings. Few large groups were without a poet or two, and these recited or sang their compositions for the pleasure of the company. One such poet was Thormod, of whom was written in the Story of Thormod:

⁶G. Vigfusson and F. York Powell, op. cit., p. 377.

He often amused the king with his poems, and it is told that he was the best of company, and he would often make verses upon anything that was going on.⁷

Music was a popular diversion amongst the old Northmen, even in the remotest ages of paganism; though, in those ancient times it was probably of a very primitive kind, and was confined only to singing, or to a few instruments of a very rude construction. Whether the old bards used to sing their poetical compositions, or merely to recite them, cannot be ascertained with any certainty; but it is more than probable that the latter method was the one more generally employed.

Their songs, called galdrar, a kind of magic song, were not, however, recited as the others, but sung, as the expression gald, which denotes a more varied and elaborate style than a mere recitation implies.⁸

In the earlier part of the Viking Age, the bard seems to have sung unaccompanied, but later, after the harp had been introduced from the Celtic lands, in imitation of the minstrels of the south, they picked out the tune upon the harp strings as they sang. From the south also came the fiddle, perhaps at about the same time as the harp. These instruments are mentioned frequently in the Sagas. In the Saga of the Ynglings, for example:

⁷Ibid., p. 712.

⁸R. Keyser, op. cit., p. 166.

King Huggleik was no warrior, but sat at home in the seat of peace. He had in his court many of all kinds of minstrels, harp-players, and jig-players, and fiddlers.⁹

Previous to the introduction of these stringed instruments from abroad, the North seems to have possessed only very simple musical instruments, such as the trumpet or lure, which is now used in the remoter parts for calling cattle home. But these pipes were perhaps employed then, only for practical purposes, as for summoning forces to battle, and for ordering an attack upon the enemy. A series of such horns dating back to the Bronze Age have been recovered from bogs in Denmark and Scania.¹⁰

What the ancient Scandinavians lacked in instrumental music they probably made up by means of voice, for they were very fond of singing. It is expressly stated in several places in the Sagas that the singing at the celebration of the Christian services charmed the pagan Northmen. This is briefly illustrated in the Saga of Olaf Tryggvison:

And now was Michaelmas come, and the king let hold hightide, and sang mass full gloriously; and thither went the Icelanders, and hearken the fair song, and the voice of the bells. And when they came back to their ships, each man said how he liked the ways of the Christian men.¹¹

⁹Snorri Sturluson, The Heimskringla, translated by W. Morris and E. Magnusson (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), volume I, p. 37.

¹⁰P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume I, p. 104.

¹¹Snorri Sturluson, op. cit., volume I, p. 336.

At social gatherings, such as feasts, not only did the soloist entertain the company by his singing, but the whole assemblage also united in singing compositions of the ballad or folk-song order, the theme of which was often an event of mere local interest, but one which had stirred the community.

The part played by the dance during the early Middle Ages is not evident, though this form of recreation and amusement was probably always indulged in by the Scandinavians to some extent, for dancing is found among virtually all primitive peoples. It is clear, however, that dancing was in later years very common, and by the end of the eleventh century it came to be opposed by the Christian clergy, on account of the alleged loose character of some of the dances. Bishop Jon Agmundarson, who was Bishop of Northern Iceland from 1106 to 1121, prohibited certain dances. This is evidenced in his biography, written by the monk Gunnlaug Leifsson in 1205:

There was a game which had been very dear to the people before the holy Jon became bishop, which was that men should while dancing, recite amorous and obscene poems to the women, and the women love verses to the men. This game, he declared, must be stopped, and he forbade it strictly; he would not allow love-verses to be recited or listened to, but yet he did not succeed in abolishing them entirely.¹²

Most of the ancient dances were dramatic in form and

¹²J. Simpson (ed.), The Northmen Talk (London: Phoenix House, 1965), p. 74.

were accompanied by spoken dialogues or by songs, usually the latter. Some were slow and stately, while others were violent and included much springing and jumping.

Various tempos of dancing at a wedding feast are alluded to in Herraud and Bosi's Saga:

King Godmund, of Gaesisvellir, was to give his sister in marriage to Siggeir, son of King Harek of Bjarmaland, and had prepared a splendid wedding feast. Sigurd played on the harp and men said no one was his equal. When the toast was proposed to Thor, Sigurd changed the tune; many jumped from their seats and moved to and fro on the floor; and this continued for a long while. Sigurd once more changed the tune, and played so loud that it echoed all around. All in the hall rose, except the bride, bridegroom and the king, and everyone was moving around the hall for a long while. Then he played gygjarslag (air of Jotun-woman) draumbul (dream-piece) and Hjarrandahljo (air of Hjarrandi). Sigurd then told the king to expect hard playing; the king was so startled that he, as well as the bride and bridegroom jumped up, and none were more lively than they, and this continued for a long while.¹³

Many of the peasant dances now found in Scandinavia are doubtless very similar in character to the ancient ones.

Besides the bards, rich hosts often supplied other special entertainers for their guests, such as jesters and jugglers who amused the audience by their antics, tricks and grotesque dances. Performing dogs are mentioned in Sverri's Saga:

The king asked who he [a beggar] was. He answered he was an Icelfander of the name Mani who had come northward from Rome. The king said: "Thou must know some wisdom Mani; sit down and sing." He then sang the Utfarardrapa [poem on a voyage to the Holy Land], and the poem was much liked and thought amusing. Two jesters

¹³P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., volume II, p. 356.

were in the stofa, who made small dogs jump over high poles in front of high-born men, and the more high-born they were, the higher they jumped.¹⁴

Dwarfs were always considered amusing and comical, and were usually found in every royal court. The antics of such a dwarf are outline in Harald Hardradi's Saga:

Tuta, a Frisian, was with King Harald; he was sent to him for show, for he was short and stout, in every respect shaped like a dwarf.¹⁵

Later the story relates how Tuta, for the amusement of the court, had to don the king's suit of chain mail, which was too large for him, and it dragged after him in the most ludicrous manner.

The round of Scandinavian life furnished many occasions for social interchange as outlined above. There were not only numerous meetings to celebrate important epochs in the life of the individual, such as wedding and funeral feasts, and banquets tendered to a person on the eve of his departure on a long or perilous journey and to celebrate his safe return, but there were also seasonal and religious holidays. At these, friends and relatives temporarily abandoned their usual daily duties and gathered under a common roof to pass the hours in a more pleasant or more exalted manner for an interval.

These were undoubtedly difficult years (the Dark

¹⁴Ibid., p. 357.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 357.

Ages) for the "common man" in Europe, moreso during the long cold winters of Scandinavia. Companionship, which brings with it a feeling of belonging and security must have been indispensable as a recreational outlet. Hence the preponderance of feasting and socializing amongst the Norsemen which brought with it the usual train of musical entertainment, dancing, story-telling and professional entertainment. But the liquor consumed at these social gatherings naturally broke down what little inhibitions the men still possessed so that their inherent aggressiveness was usually unleashed at these festive occasions.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the native musical instruments of the Norsemen were crude and incapable of a wide range of musical composition. But cultural interchange through maritime activity naturally saw the introduction of musical instruments to Viking communities capable of better quality and more refined music. The introduction of superior musical instruments was naturally accompanied by professional musicians. Their music soon diffused among the people and many a long winter night must have been spent in communal singing and festivity.

Chapter XI

SAILING AND ROWING

Almost all Viking enterprises depended on ships and many demanded a high degree of seamanship. These ships, and the ability to handle them, were the product of centuries of experience gained among the islands, and on the rivers, lakes and fjords of Scandinavia. The environment was ideal for the development of these techniques for, in much of the north, boats were indispensable. Without them life could hardly have been sustained along much of the Norwegian coast; they were needed not only for communications in the fjords and among the islands, but also for fishing. The same was true of the islands of Denmark and the Baltic. Even in mainland Sweden the rivers and lakes were used as route-ways through the forest, and boats were an important item of equipment, as the rich boat burials of the Vendel and Viking periods testify. It was, in these circumstances, that techniques of boat-building, and rowing and sailing were developed which led, eventually, to the production of the remarkable and superbly functional vessels that are nowadays loosely called the Viking Ships.

The construction of these ships and their development from comparatively primitive boats can be studied in some detail. There are three main sources of information; the remains of the vessels themselves, contemporary depictions of ships in stone, or embroidery and written evidence.

One of the best preserved ships of the pre-Viking

Age was the Nydam Oak boat discovered in 1863 near Slesvig in Denmark.¹ Its length is about 75 feet; its widest part about 10 feet. It held fourteen benches and was rowed with twenty-eight oars, the average length of which was 12 feet. By its side was the rudder, about 10 feet long.

The bottom plank, which is not a keel proper, is 45 feet long, and of a single piece. The oar-tholes are fastened to the gunwales with bast ropes, and, though they are all of one general shape, there are no two alike.

The boat is clinch-built; that is, the planks are held together by large iron bolts with round heads outside, and clinch plates on the inside, at a distance of five inches from each other. The space between the planks is filled with a woolen material and pitch. The ship's structure is such to give it great elasticity, which must have been of good service in the surf and in a heavy sea.

The Nydam Ship was built of oak, a primitive characteristic, but which sets on the ship a stamp of high quality. From the painstaking treatment of the wood and the resourceful craftsmanship of the whole construction, it is evident that the Nydam Ship provides a specimen of the best that the shipbuilding of the time could achieve. By means of the many other antiquities associated with the ship, the ship has been dated to the fourth century A.D.

¹H. Shetelig and H. Falk, Scandinavian Archaeology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 353.

With respect to the Viking Age, the three Viking Ships that are the best known and best preserved come from Norwegian burial-mounds that lie around the Oslo Fjord, at Gokstad, Oseberg and Tune; three rowing boats accompanied the Gokstad Ship; five other large ships, of a later period, were raised in 1962 from the Roskilde Fjord in Denmark.² The ship found at Gokstad was by far the finest in both technical perfection and in preservation.

The Gokstad Ship, dating to the ninth century, was seventy-six feet long from stem to stem, with a beam of seventeen feet six inches, and a little over six feet four inches from the bottom of the keel to the gunwale and amidships. The ship had a keel of fifty-seven feet, nine inches, made from a single oak timber, and was clinker built of sixteen strakes of differing but carefully calculated thickness. The strakes were joined together by round-headed iron rivets driven through from the outside and secured inside by means of small, square iron plates. The caulking was of tarred animal hair or wool. The hull was kept in shape by nineteen frames and crossbeams. The decking of pine, in this case loose so that the space beneath could be used for storage, was laid over these beams. The strakes below the waterline were tied to the frames with spruce root lashings, a device which contributed much to the ship's

²J. Simpson, Everyday Life in the Viking Age (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 74.



Fig. 26. Viking ship from Gokstad.

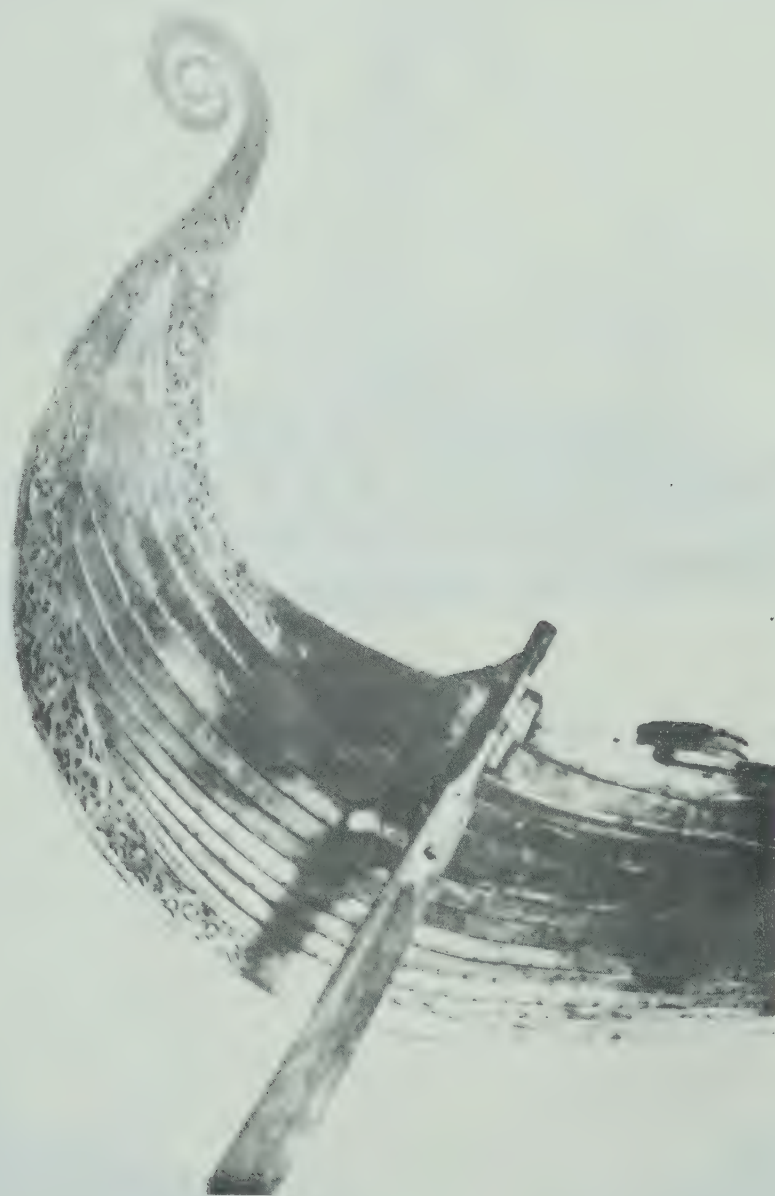


Fig. 27. The richly ornamented prow of the Osberg Viking ship showing the side rudder.

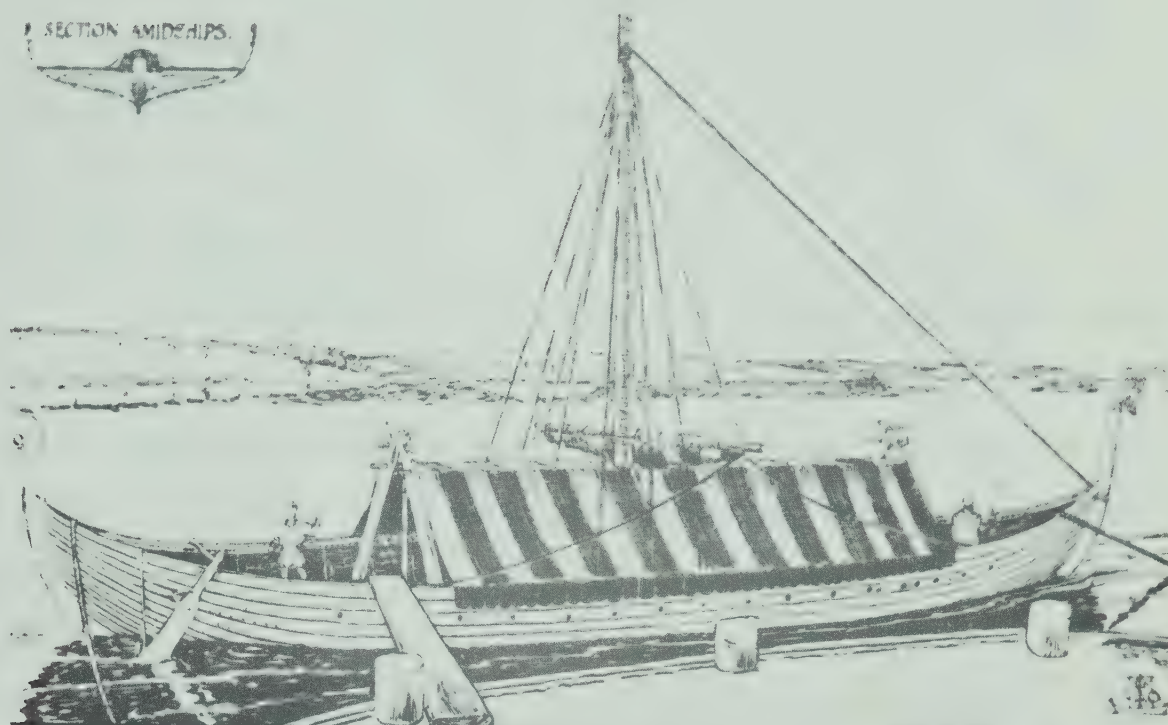


Fig. 28. Replica of Gokstad ship with tilt up at night.



Fig. 29. Viking ship from Nydam.

flexibility. This was still further increased by a carefully systemized trenailing of the above-water strakes to the wooden knees and cross-beams or, in the case of the top two, to half-ribs secured to the strakes below and butted into the underside of the gunwale.³

The elasticity of the Gokstad Ship was such that the replica of this ship sailed across the Atlantic in 1893 by Magnus Andersen showed a gunwale twisting out of true by as much as six inches, yet was safe, fast and water-tight. This Atlantic crossing by Andersen from Bergen to Newfoundland took twenty-eight days, and Andersen reported:

Viking [name of the replica] did her finest lap from the 15th to the 16th of May, when she covered a distance of two hundred and twenty-three nautical miles. We noted with admiration the ship's graceful movements, and with pride we noted her speed, sometimes as much as eleven knots. . . . We were afforded a first class opportunity of testing Viking's performance when sailing close to the wind. To our great surprise she proved to be in the same class as most modern two-masters.⁴

With her mighty keel and flexible frame and planking the Viking ship was an inspired combination of strength and elasticity. This power to cross seas and oceans did not exhaust her excellence as a raider. An exceedingly shallow draught, rarely exceeding four feet, allowed her to penetrate all save the shallowest rivers, gave her mastery of harbour-

³A. W. Brogger and H. Shetelig, The Viking Ships, their Ancestry and Evolution (Oslo, 1953).

⁴B. Almgren, The Viking (London: C. A. Watts & Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 254.

less shelving beaches, and facilitated the rapid disembarkation of men at the point of attack. By turning into the wind and making off by oar she was almost immune from pursuit by the clumsier sailing ships of the lands she preyed on.

The ship was constructed almost entirely of oak. The sixteen pairs of oars were of pine, so regulated in length that they struck the water in unison. They were operated not by means of rowlocks but by closable holes in the fourteenth strake. The mast, too, was of pine, probably about thirty-five feet tall, with a big square sail made of strips of heavy woollen cloth, strengthened, it would appear, by a rope network, and hoisted on a yard some thirty-seven feet long. The apparatus for bearing and supporting the mast was massive and strong. First there was the "old woman" or keelson, a prostrate block of solid oak resting on the keel over a span of four frames, with a cunningly designed socket to take the boot of the mast and assist its raising and lowering. Above the keelson, supported by the "old woman" and no less than six crossbeams was another big block of oak, the mast partner, its forward section massive and closed, to take on three sides the pressure of the raised mast when the ship was running under sail and transmit the wind's power to the hull, its rear grooved to facilitate the masts lowering. When the mast was raised this groove was filled with a fitting oak block or wedge.⁵ From the Gotland pictorial stones it appears that

⁵T. Sjøvold, The Oseberg Find and Other Viking Ship Finds (Oslo, 1959).

sail could be effectively shortened by the use of reefing lines, and recent opinion has inclined to the view that the Viking Ship could be sailed across and even near the wind. This is supported once again by Magnus Andersen's report on the behaviour of the Gokstad Ship replica in its trans-Atlantic crossing in 1893:

A real SSW gale was now blowing. Nonetheless we found that if the ship could carry sail (in these conditions) she would of her own accord, progress slightly westwards despite the wind direction, and why should we not make use of it when we could? So we hauled in the drift anchor, hoisted the mainsail but reefed as much as possible. Soon the Viking was gathering speed, although she could not come closer than six degrees to the wind--but on the other hand she was not carried off course more than four degrees.⁶

The Gokstad Ship was steered by a side-rudder fastened to the starboard quarter, a singularly effective instrument pronounced by Magnus Andersen to be one of the clearest proofs of northern shipbuilding skills and seamanship. On his Atlantic crossing he found it satisfactory in every way, decideldly superior to a rudder on the sternpost, and managable by a single member of the crew in any weather with just one small line to help him. Andersen wrote:

I have thought much about this and have come to the conclusion that this rudder may be considered as one of the most definite proofs of our ancestor's great understanding and seamanship. In my experience the side-rudder is much superior in such a ship to a rudder on the stem-post. I am glad to be able to state that it worked satisfactorily in every way and had the advantage of never kicking, as stem-post rudder would certainly

⁶B. Almgren, op. cit., p. 254.

have done. One man could steer in any weather with merely a small line to help.⁷

Viking ships were frequently furnished with a ship's boat, sometimes stowed on board, sometimes towed behind. Three such were found with the Gokstad Ship, beautifully made and thirty-six, twenty-six and twenty-one feet long, respectively, two with masts, and all three equipped for rowing; but it is possible that the two bigger ones were not true ship's boats but grave goods.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the ship which carried the Norsemen overseas, such as the Gokstad Ship, was a sailing ship; her oars were an auxiliary form of power for use when she was becalmed, in some state of emergency, or required manoeuvring in narrow waters such as the fjords. This was true of raiding ships and carriers alike, though the ratio of men to space would naturally be higher in the raider. The ship of all work, the true ocean-goer, the halskip or knorr, was in its general construction similar to the Gokstad Ship, but broader in the beam, deeper in the water, and of a higher freeboard. This has always seemed clear from Saga evidence, and was confirmed by the raising of Wreck One from the waters of Peberrenden in Roskilde Fjord, Denmark, in 1962.⁸

⁷P. H. Sawyer, The Age of the Vikings (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), p. 71.

⁸P. H. Sawyer, op. cit., chapter IV.

With reference to contemporary depictions of Viking Ships in stone or embroidery, the magnificent series of monumental stones erected in Gotland between the fifth century and eleventh provide information of the greatest value about ships, especially about their rigging. The stone carvings in mainland Sweden have less value for this subject, but there are a few with ships, such as the early Viking period stone at Sparlosa in Vastergotland. From the end of the Viking Age comes some of the most interesting, but tantalising evidence, in the Bayeux Tapestry. The theme of this elaborate piece of embroidery is the Norman conquest of England, and it was produced within a few years of that event. In it, many ships are shown being built, sailed and beached, and despite the difficulty of the medium the artist has contrived to represent many details with great accuracy. Thus the Bayeux Tapestry is one of the most valuable sources of information about the construction and handling of ships in the middle of the eleventh century.⁹

From the Sagas it is learned that the aim of every chief was to be powerful at sea; every bondi was the owner of one or more boats. They were brought up on the sea, but were, of course also trained to fight on land. Fortunately, Frankish and old English chronicles help to corroborate the general accuracy of the Eddas and Sagas, and from them we

⁹F. Stenton (ed.), The Bayeux Tapestry (London: Phaidon Press, 1957), pp. 1 ff.

have several accounts of the number of Viking Ships which sailed up the Seine, the Rhine, the Elbe and the Weser, or went to England. A good example is Ohthere's account of his voyages, reported in the translation of Orosius.¹⁰ From these and similar sources much of value can be learned: Ohthere, for example, describes how the skins of seals and walruses were used for ropes. But the most colourful and detailed information is found in the Norse Sagas, which contain abundant references to ships; indeed, our knowledge of the Norse technical terms for parts of ships and for sailing operations is largely derived from them. It was written in Olaf Tryggvason's Saga that Harald Blatonn went to Norway with a fleet of seven hundred ships:

The King of Denmark sailed from the south into Vikin with seven hundred ships and there all the inhabitants came under his rule; and when he reached Tunsberg, large numbers gathered to him.¹¹

In Harald Fairhain's Saga:

During the winter King Harald had a large dragon (ship) made and fitted out very splendidly. He placed on it his hird and Beserks. The stem defenders were the most carefully selected, for they had the king's standard.¹²

The ships used by the Vikings are fascinating in

¹⁰H. Sweet (ed.), King Alfred's Orosius (London: Early English Text Society, 1883), pp. 17-21.

¹¹P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 178.

¹²Ibid., p. 181.

themselves, but for the historian of the period the study of their design and construction and the way they were handled is particularly rewarding. The Scandinavians of the Viking period are seen to have been masters of the design and use of sailing ships, and it was the possession of these cunningly contrived vessels that gave them one of their most important technical advantages in both peace and war.

Obviously the Viking Ships were used more for utilitarian purposes rather than in a recreational capacity. But it would be wrong to imagine that the competitive element amongst ship-masters and sailors did not exist. Two ships meeting en-route down a fjord were bound, at times, to issue a challenge, verbal or otherwise, to have a race. As oars were the main means of propulsion in the fjords team work, rowing technique and extreme physical fitness must have been prerequisites to a fast ship. As the many bends of the fjords had also to be negotiated steering skill must also have been vital. These challenges, even on their unorganized basis, must surely have been forerunners of modern-day competitive rowing. Individual rowing ability is mentioned in the Sagas, but no reference is made to racing over a predetermined course. Races, if they did exist, were probably decided when one ship fell back through the sheer exhaustion of the rowers, their poor technique or the inferior design of their ship.

At a time when trans-oceanic yacht races are now

becoming increasingly popular, it is of considerable interest to note with what comparative ease and speed the Viking sailing ships were able to transverse oceans. The Vikings were indeed excellent sailors and modern-day yachtsmen cannot help but marvel at the design and capability of their ships, especially when it is remembered that Viking society did not have at its disposal the technology of the twentieth century.

Chapter XII

VIKING ART AND POETRY

Art and poetry were popular recreational pursuits of the Vikings. In Earl Rognvald's poem, previously mentioned, he boasted of his proficiency in "smith-craft." This was a term which included all forms of metal-working, and also wood-carving, bone-carving, carving in stone, and various other forms of handicraft. There were, of course, many specialists craftsmen earning their living by their work, and the high technical achievement of many Viking Age objects indicates that they were made by such men. But ordinary farmers and warriors would also turn their hands to metal-work to meet household needs, or simply as a pleasant pastime.

The decorative impulse in Viking art was extremely strong; surfaces were covered with close and complex ornamentation which often, on close examination, is seen to be a semi-abstract pattern of intertwining animals whose distorted limbs and bodies twist and clutch at one another in a formal, rhythmical design. There are several distinct varieties of these animal patterns, and geometric ornament was also much used. The techniques were highly skilled in both wood and metal-working, producing results of amazing richness, accuracy and minuteness of detail, while at the same time the overall impression is both intricate and vigorous.¹ Obviously the finest pieces were produced by

¹G. Jones, A History of the Vikings (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 336-342.

master-craftsmen for wealthy buyers; nevertheless, if more examples of furniture and utensils had survived, one might well have found that articles in everyday use were as amply (though probably not as skilfully) ornamented as those laid in the graves of the rich. Certainly much woodwork even in ordinary houses was carved, especially the central roof-posts and the wall panelling; walls were also adorned with long narrow strips of tapestry forming a freeze around the room, in the same manner as the Bayeux Tapestry; benches were often covered with patterned cloths. Visually, the Viking world was gay and colourful.

Besides the abstract designs based on geometric or animal forms, the Vikings also had a tradition of simpler pictorial art, apparently always applied to subjects from myths, religious rituals, or heroic legends. The surviving examples are mostly the enduring stone-carvings of Gotland, Sweden or the Isle of Man; their scenes, where these can be identified, show the welcome of the dead to Valhalla², the myths of Thor and Odin and the exploits of Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer.³ The unidentified ones are probably of the same type--though it is conceivable that some memorial stones might show scenes from the life of the dead man. We

²E. Oxenstierna, The Norseman (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Publishers, Ltd., 1965), p. 226.

³J. Brondsted, The Vikings (London: Penguin Books, 1965), plate 19B.



Fig. 30. Memorial stone at Stora Hammar, Larbo dated to the eighth century.



Fig. 31. Silver beakers from Denmark dated to about 800 A.D.



Fig. 32. Runic rock carving at Sollentuna, Sweden, dated to the mid eleventh century.



Fig. 33. Head of a Norseman carved on the Oseberg wagon.

also know from literary references that shields could be painted or engraved with mythological scenes, and the superb Oseberg Tapestry reminds us that narrative art in needlework was well known among Viking women.⁴

The Gotland picture-stones are particularly satisfying works of art. They are huge blocks, often ten to twelve feet high, and cut to a characteristic mushroom shape; the figures, carved in very low relief, are usually laid out in orderly, well-proportioned panels separated by bands of ornament. Originally the whole surface was painted over in various colours; the painting of the background has been restored, so that the figures should show up in silhouette, but details painted on the figures themselves are lost forever, which increases the difficulties of interpretation.⁵

The human figures on stone-carvings and tapestries are rather stylized, as are the faces on little metal pendants and other ornaments. But there are also a few heads, modelled in the round, whose features are realistic and indeed strongly individual--notably those on the frame of the Oseberg wagon, and one from Sweden, carved on the end of a horn rod. Nor must one forget that the humour which is so marked in Norse literature occasionally comes out in art, as for example, in a set of twelve grotesque pendants whose

⁴E. Oxenstierna, op. cit., p. 196.

⁵G. Jones, op. cit., p. 342.

exaggerated features, half-human and half-snake, are picked out in the most delicate silver filigree.⁶

With regards to poetry, it seems that verbal dexterity was held in high esteem. A clever poet could grow rich by attaching himself to a king's household and composing highly-wrought poems in praise of the king's valour, for which he could be rewarded with rings, weapons or other gifts. Icelanders showed particular aptitude for this, and many took service at foreign courts, sometimes for a few years, sometimes for life; their poems are often valuable sources for the historian.

But these semi-professionals were not the only poets; many men could produce pithy, eighty-line stanzas commemorating a moment of triumph or danger in battle, threatening, mocking or cursing an enemy, praising a girl lamenting a friend's death, or foreboding their own doom; and for each man who could compose poetry there were dozens who could appreciate it, even though its characteristic merits were scrupulous obedience to rigid metrical rules, intricate patterns of alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme, and a style in which persons and things were obliquely indicated through traditional, and particularly mythological, allusions. This type of poetry is called scaldic (from skald, a court poet); it can be traced as far

⁶H. Arbman, The Vikings (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), pp. 118-147.

back as the mid-ninth century, and its occurrence on eleventh-century Swedish rune-stones shows that it was known there as well as in Norway and Iceland.⁷

These scaldic poems and songs influenced the youth of the country, who listened to them with ambition, urging them to emulate the deeds of those whose praises were sung. Talented skalds held positions of honour at royal courts. This is clearly indicated in Egil's Saga:

Of all his hirdmen the king valued his skalds the most. They were placed on the second high-seat bench.⁸

Far older and simpler than the scalds was the type of poetry known as Eddic poetry, though it does not follow that all surviving examples are equally old. Eddic poems are anonymous narratives or dialogues or collections of proverbs and religious lore; their subjects are either mythological or drawn from legends of ancient Germanic heroes, and often correspond with scenes popular in art.

Lays about heroes were being composed among many Germanic tribes at least as early as the fourth century, and by Viking times all Scandinavian peoples must have known such works, though the Icelanders were the only ones eventually to preserve some in writing. They were originally meant to be declaimed in chieftains halls, possibly accom-

⁷J. Simpson, The Northmen Talk (London: Phoenix House, 1965), pp. XV-XXVIII.

⁸P. B. Du Chaillu, The Viking Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), volume II, p. 391.

panied by the harp, and their proud tales of vengeance, loyalty, fate and death are the finest expression of the heroic ideals of this culture.⁹

Whereas the heroic lays of the Poetic Edda are almost always tragic, the mythological ones are more varied in tone, ranging from lively accounts of Thor's encounters with giants or monsters to the personal tragedy of the death of Balder or the cosmic tragedy of the Doom of the Gods;¹⁰ other are not narratives at all, but collections of proverbial wisdom. On the whole there is little to link these poems directly to the cult practices (as distinct from the stories) of heathen religion; they were designed for entertainment, not for worship.

Poetry, whether Eddic or scaldic, may not have been the only literary entertainment in chieftains halls. There is a well-known anecdote about an improverished Icелander who visited King Harald Hardradi:

One summer an Icелander came to King Harald, who asked him what he knew. He said he knew some sagas. The King said: "I will receive thee, and thou shalt join my hird this winter, and always entertain my men when they want it, whoever asks thee." He did so. He was soon well liked by the hird; they gave him clothes and the King himself gave him a good weapon.¹¹

⁹E. Bredsdorff and B. Mortensen, An Introduction to Scandinavian Literature (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1951),

¹⁰H. A. Guerber, Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas (London: George G. Harrap & Company, 1911).

¹¹P. B. Du Chaillu, op. cit., p. 393.

Though this pleasing anecdote was only written in the thirteenth-century, its picture of eleventh-century customs may well be accurate. However, there is not enough evidence to show whether the formal telling of sagas was a talent cultivated in the earlier Viking Age. Informal story-telling there must surely have been; genealogies were learned, anecdotes about ancestors were remembered, news was constantly exchanged, witty sayings and clever verses were repeated and, above all, the concern for personal fame ensured that the memory of a man's deeds was kept alive. This was, of course, particularly true of kings and great warriors, but the eagerness with which Icelanders fostered traditions about the first settlers shows that the same impulse was present at other levels of society.

Arts and crafts were obviously important forms of recreation among the Vikings, and as such were not consciously indulged in for the sake of any reward beyond the activities themselves. They offered the Norsemen outlets for their mental and creative powers, and were engaged in because of inner desire and not because of outer compulsion. This is still the case today as witnessed by the wide range of arts and crafts offered in recreation programs at schools, colleges and community centres in many countries. These activities must have helped to fill up what leisure time the Vikings had at their disposal, and were indulged in from choice because of the personal enjoyment and satisfaction

which it brings directly to the individual. Each of the arts and crafts were an end in themselves, and, when performed in a recreational capacity, personal enjoyment rather than material reward was the prime objective.

Chapter XIII

CONCLUSION

Comparative studies in play, games, pastimes and physical activities give as much insight into the way of life of other cultures, past and present, as do comparative studies in the other disciplines. Undoubtedly all students are enlightened by exposure to other cultural concepts and social systems. Understanding the meaning of literature, drama, art, music and games of a culture is the surest way to understanding people. Throughout history, physical activities and recreational activities in many countries have displayed several consistent purposes. They reflect, it is said, the very society that fosters them.¹ Also, physical fitness for national survival has been a persistent theme throughout history, whilst physical activity has long been used in many societies to develop a solid community spirit and morale. Sports and other forms of physical activity have even been used as a basis for the development of vocational interests and skills. Bearing all this in mind, it is suggested that there is a value in and, therefore, a need for comparative studies both past and present. In the light of cross-cultural studies it is possible to re-evaluate one's own systems and determine what is best for

¹D. B. Van Dalen, E. D. Mitchell and B. L. Bennett, A World History of Physical Education (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1953), pp. 589-592.

meeting the goal's of one's society. Physical educators are increasing their understanding of individuals and societies, past and present, and thus their ability to shape their own educative institutions.

This thesis has looked at evidence of physical activities and recreational pastimes of the Vikings. An attempt was made to show the important role these activities occupied within Viking society. As such it can be regarded as a historical--comparative study. Historical methods of research provides scholars with tools for securing reliable knowledge about the past. This knowledge has then to be interpreted and evaluated. Modern historians generally agree on the techniques to employ in evaluating source materials, but they still argue about the purpose and scope of historical research.

Some historians believe that constructing laws by generalizing upon historical data is entirely outside their research province. They think that it is their duty to acquire richly detailed knowledge of an event or condition that occurred in a particular time and place in the past and to trace what preceded and succeeded it. They are not concerned about what always typically, or generally happens; similarities between events; or repeatable aspects of events. They are interested in the unique aspects of a specific event that differentiate it from other events. Fling summarizes the opinion of this school of historians as

follows:

When our attention is directed toward the uniqueness, the individuality of past social facts, when they interest because of their importance for the unique evolution of man in his activities as a social being, in selecting the facts and in grouping them into a complex, evolving whole, we employ the historical method; the result of our work is history.

If, on the contrary, we are interested in what past social facts have in common, in the way in which social facts repeat themselves, if our purpose is to form generalizations, or laws, concerning social activities, we employ another logical method, the method of the natural sciences. We select our facts not for their individuality or for the importance of their individuality for a complex whole, but for what each fact has in common with others and the synthesis is not a complex, unique whole, but a generalization in which no trace of the individuality of the past social fact remains. The result of our work is sociology, not history. Thus the work of the historian supplements that of the sociologist. The historian is interested in quality, individuality, uniqueness; the sociologist in quantity, in generalization, in repetition.²

In contrast to Fling, some men contend that historians must go beyond the description and interpretation of particular events in the past. They believe that it is important to study the past for the lessons it teaches, for the broad generalizations or laws that can be derived from a study of historical facts. Like Thucydides they want to tell:

. . . what has happened and will hereafter happen again according to human nature.³

²F. M. Fling, The Writing of History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), pp. 16-17.

³M. Gladys Scott (ed.), Research Methods in Health, Physical Education, Recreation (Washington: American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 1959), p. 468.

For the most part, however, educators are not deeply involved in this controversy. In general, they hold that there is a place for studies of unique, unrepeatable events as well as studies that trace recurring factors, cyclical variations, and similarities between events.

In writing this thesis the author has attempted not only to produce evidence of physical activities, play and games, with characteristics that were unique to Viking society, but also to form a number of generalizations.

Obviously certain of the Viking physical activities, play, games and pastimes had unique characteristics, having possibly developed spontaneously as a result of the economic, geographical and social factors. The Vikings lived near the sea and on fjords, so the easiest and quickest way to get from one settlement to another was by ships and boats. As a result, they became excellent sailors and oarsmen. The abundance of good timber in Scandinavia meant allowance could be made for trial and error in constructing new designs of ships. This, combined with the desire to sail the seas in search of riches, plus the need to acquire new settlements overseas due to overpopulation at home, meant the Vikings had to construct ships that would be able to withstand long sea voyages. The result was the marvelously versatile Viking ships, the construction and performance of which is still marvelled at today. Amongst other examples of physical activities, play, games and pastimes unique to

the Vikings were their methods and rules in duelling, horse-fighting, and certain aspects of their art.

Although every society has characteristics and peculiarities of recreational activity that are unique to that society, and have evolved in that society alone, it must be recognized that wherever social intercourse takes place between societies and cultures, ideas, beliefs, customs and practices will diffuse from one society to another. Once they have passed from one culture to another, they will obviously undergo some change in order to adapt to their new environment. But basically, they will remain the same and will then be passed on not only from generation to generation, but will continue to find their way into new societies and cultures. Thus each culture will have some physical activities, play, and games with characteristics unique to that culture, as well as others which were borrowed from other cultures. This seems to have been true of the Vikings. Some of the techniques and rules of their games were unique to their society, as has been pointed out, whilst others, as in their board games, and music and dance, must have been acquired from other cultural groups.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that generalizations can be made with regard to what types of physical activities, sports, games, and pastimes, people will naturally indulge in given certain economic, geographical and social conditions. Thus if there are lakes and rivers

people will learn to swim naturally without having to learn how to swim from neighbouring cultural groups. If there are mountains to climb the people will, if necessary, evolve their own climbing techniques at first, which may later be improved upon as a result of contact with neighbouring people. Human beings always have and probably always will love to assert their individual physical prowess in various ways, whether it be through contact activities such as wrestling and boxing, through throwing objects for distance, jumping for height and distance, or through running to prove either superior speed or endurance. People have always waged war amongst themselves, and this necessitates the skilfull handling of weapons. It is only natural that the skilfull handling of weapons should become competitive within cultural groups and thus evolve into sports. The Vikings were a warlike people and, the skilfull handling of weapons was a prerequisite to survival. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in times of peace the Vikings maintained these skills by competing amongst each other in duelling and archery contests. In other words, sports and games reflect the society that fosters them. In winter the Vikings had, by necessity, to learn how to move themselves and loads efficiently across the snow. Thus snow-shoes, skis and sledges evolved, and with them technique in using them. Evidence in the form of rock carvings indicate that skis, sledges and skates had evolved long before the Viking Age.

This is probably true. But it is also possible that they improved upon their skating and skiing technique and that ability to traverse snowy terrain on skis and ice on skates must have varied from individual to individual.

Taking all this into consideration, it might be safe to conclude then that generalizations and possibly even laws can be formulated with regard to the natural evolution of physical activities, sports, games and pastimes amongst people. History does repeat itself.

Finally, the question might be posed, namely what contribution did the Viking Age make to the development and progress of physical education and recreation? Vendien and Nixon were probably fairly accurate when they stated that:

Primitive cultures placed central emphasis upon physical education as a basis for the improvement of everyday, practical living.

Oriental cultures, though giving little emphasis to a program of exercise, are credited with preserving sport and dance as art, advancing the methodology of formal instruction and envisioning the leisure-time relevance of sport.⁴

In classical Greece, the city states had highly organized systems of physical education which varied from state to state and reflected the political organizations and intellectual development of those states. The Olympic Games and other athletic festivals which drew competitors

⁴C. L. Vendien and J. E. Nixon, The World Today in Health, Physical Education and Recreation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J." Prentice Hall Inc., 1968), p. 27.

from many different states and which were the occasions for highly technical performances of athletic events, rested on a foundation of extensive physical education throughout Greece.⁵

The army in ancient Rome had its own specialized form of physical training. For the ordinary Roman physical education was recreational in that it was designed to give pleasure and relief and to provide enough exercise to maintain a sense of well-being in men and women who had little work and much leisure.⁶

Little as yet is known about physical education in Europe between the collapse of the Roman Empire and in the Renaissance period. The later Middle Ages, however, from about the beginning of the eleventh century on, saw the emergence of knightly games and athletic competitions mainly for chivalric purposes and indulged in mainly by the aristocracy. This was the Age of Chivalry.

During the Renaissance the re-emergence of physical education was as significant as the earlier achievements of the Greeks. Under the influence of the humanists and within the city states of Italy during the fifteenth century the physical education of the ancients was translated and

⁵E. N. Gardiner, Athletics of the Ancient World (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

⁶J. G. Dixon and P. C. McIntosh, Landmarks in the History of Physical Education (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 3.

interpreted for the new aristocracy.

The question might be asked, namely, where do Viking physical activities, play and games fit into this picture. On the basis of the evidence produced in this thesis it would seem that the Viking system of physical activities and recreation falls somewhere between the general pattern of the Middle Ages and the attitude of primitive cultures towards physical education. The Viking system was close to the primitive in that many of their physical activities, such as hunting on skis, were the basis for the improvement of everyday, practical living, as well as being recreational. Viking kings, for example, would hunt for the sheer enjoyment and excitement of hunting, and not for material gain. But Viking physical activities also had a touch of chivalry in that individual honour and pride was often at stake. The ideals of knighthood embraced ideals of physical prowess, manifested particularly in skill at arms, sportsmanship and courtesy, ideals which were not entirely absent in Viking physical contests. But Viking physical education did not possess the higher aesthetic ideals characterized by the physical education of the ancient Greeks. The Vikings appreciated music, poetry and art, but when it came to movement they were interested only in superior physical prowess and the final outcome of the contest. They did not appreciate grace and rhythm of movement, and the end-result of competition was all-important.

As a result they did not associate physical education with the development of aesthetic qualities which usually contribute to a national image.

There are several unanswered questions in this study. The author has touched upon a number of conjectured relationships and possibilities, such as the possible link between lacrosse and knattleikr, without attempting any substantial conclusions. Other possibilities for further study are the origins of the play, games and pastimes of the Vikings, the relationship of certain Viking games to warfare, and which of the Viking games were relative to which social class. It is the recommendation of the author that these questions be further investigated and analyzed should additional and more detailed information of the period be revealed.

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APPENDIX

ILLUSTRATIONS AND THEIR SOURCES

Figure	Source
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|-----|---|
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30. Arbman, op. cit., p. 154, plate 1.
31. Ibid., plate 59.
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